SCREEN MUSIC FUTURES
Deriving Income from Screen Composition - An Australian Industry Symposium
Rebecca Coyle and Natalie Lewandowski

Abstract

A public symposium co-hosted by the Australian Guild of Screen Composers and a Southern Cross University research team was held at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, Sydney, in September 2010. The event was coordinated by Jo Smith, Executive Manager of the AGSC, with session host Rebecca Coyle, and the speakers were composers Guy Gross, Christopher Gordon and Amanda Brown; composer/AFTRS educator Martin Armiger; composer and President of the AGSC, Clive Harrison; and Michelle O’Donnell from the Australasian Performing Rights Association. The article comprises an edited extract of the symposium transcription that focuses on the business aspects of screen music production, and how composers can generate income from their work in the future.

Keywords
Australian screen music, Australian Guild of Screen Composers, screen music industry, Australasian Performing Rights Association

Introduction

A research project titled ‘Music production and technology in Australian Film: enabling Australian film to embrace innovation’ has been running from 2007 to 2010 (funded by Australia Research Council Discovery Project Grant DP 0770026). One of the project’s culminating events was an industry symposium co-hosted by the Australian Guild of Screen Composers (AGSC) and the research team, held at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS), Sydney, on 22 September 2010. The Australian film music research project had looked at many elements of feature film music produced in Australia from the Revival period (late-1960s) to the present, but the symposium was designed to extend debate into some of the most urgent issues facing screen composers in the future. In addressing this brief, the major themes that arose included: the impact of new software and technologies on work practices of composers; innovative practices for the future and the role of the internet; industrial issues including rates of pay and collaborative approaches; and training and education. The following is an edited extract of the symposium transcription (by Natalie Lewandowski) specifically focusing on the business aspects of screen music production, and how composers can derive income from their work.
Brief profiles for the speakers at the Screen Music Futures symposium, in order of presentation, are:

Jo Smith - Executive Director of the Australian Guild of Screen Composers, has worked as a Policy Advisor for the Screen Producers Association of Australia (SPAA), and consultant to the Australian Directors Guild and the Australian Writers’ Guild.

Clive Harrison (President, Australian Guild of Screen Composers and composer (http://www.clivemusic.com.au/);

Michelle O’Donnell - Manager, Film & TV Writers, Australasian Performing Rights Association (http://www.apra-amcos.com.au/)


Amanda Brown – popular music performer and composer for Look Both Ways; Son of a Lion; recipient of the 2009 APRA-AGSC Screen Music Award for Best Documentary (http://www.myspace.com/amandagabriellebrown);

Martin Armiger – composer for film and television, songwriter; Head of Screen Composition, AFTRS; and Board Member of Screen Rights (http://www.martinarmiger.com/)

Christopher Gordon – composer for Mao’s Last Dancer, winner of the 2009 AFI Award for Best Music; co-composer for Master & Commander: The Far Side of the World (http://www.christophergordon.net/index.htm);

Additional questions and observations are provided by members of the audience, which included AGSC members, AFTRS and other tertiary students, academics and other researchers, and interested members of the public. The transcription extract commences with Jo Smith’s welcome.

Jo Smith (JS):

It’s not often that you actually get industry and academia coming together and the film industry is usually pretty isolated. The aim tonight is to look at various questions which we need to look at as a [screen music] industry; issues that are to be considered include – Innovation, What is the future of screen music in Australia, technology, industrial issues, it’s always been a question of whether or not composers should be industrializing, rates of pay, the impact of whether we can continue to have an industry based on what people are earning, training and education, also another central question to this industry is; whether or not there actually is a screen music industry in Australia – is there an actual industry or is it just people working on their own in their own little studios that just happen to come together because of their work on films.

Clive Harrison (CH):
Some of the issues that are top of mind for me and for many composers who contact the guild [AGSC] are the nature of the contracts that they are being asked to sign when they are doing television or film work. Payment per episode fees, publishing, who gets the publishing – do they retain 100%? The relationship of co-production partners, for instance if they have partners in France, England, the USA etc.

I have noticed that people here are far more qualified than me to talk about the film and motion picture end of town – I have not done that – I have just done the television end of town. For example, a typical mid-range TV cartoon series produced in Australia, the composer may get AUD$3000 or $4000 an episode, per episode, for 22 minutes, of which 15 to 18 minutes would be highly synchronised, so there is a lot of time spent synchronising. You're not writing two minute cues which are washing underneath the dialogue, you are writing music that is hitting stuff—every five to ten seconds you're hitting something. It is quite labour intensive, I would quite commonly spend 80 to 100 hours for the first episode and by the time I get to episode 20 or 26 I might still be doing 30 hours per episode. So there are a lot of hours going into it, as well as providing all the recording equipment, doing everything basically. So using that as a starting place, the 3 or 4 grand an episode, I can say that there are some Australian composers that are getting a lot more than that and there are certainly composers who are getting less than that. I know composers that are getting double that in Australia, but there are not many.

I was interested to find that, in Canada, animation composers were getting similar rates of pay, factoring in the exchange rate and so forth – they were getting similar money for their budget. The same sort of story in the UK, slightly higher rates of pay, but it is hard to say. You can’t ring up every animation composer in England and ask, ‘What are you charging?’

I found it interesting when I spoke to a number of animation composers in Los Angeles and New York that some of them were getting USD$10-12,000 an episode. Which would seem to be a fairly standard rate in the top end of the spectrum, not the high top end, but they were doing okay. This brings me just to inform you about the publishing issue. Before 2000 I used to retain all of my publishing and after 2000 things started to happen where I was starting to notice that production houses were starting to sniff around and ask for half of the publisher’s share, meaning 25% of my share of publishing. So negotiations started to take place. More recently, however, at first I started hearing anecdotal evidence that production houses were asking for 50% of the publishing, which horrified me. Then I got asked for 50% of my publishing on a recent show. So it is clear that, in the animation world, production houses are saying “There’s an income stream that has been going to composers all this time” – a royalty stream, “we want a piece of it”. They don’t take into consideration in that regard, that pay rates for composers have gone down dramatically since the 1980s and there has been a movement by some composers in Los Angeles to join up with the [International Brotherhood of] Teamsters union so they have some negotiating clout to stop the downward trend on pay rates and conditions.

Generally speaking, from what I can glean from talking to composers and the president of the guild in LA – yes the model in the USA is definitely that
the composer hands over 50% of their publishing, i.e. 100% of the publisher’s share and keeps 50% for himself. However the pie is bigger and they're getting bigger upfront fees from what I can gather. I am happy to hear other people have different experiences of this. So what we have is a situation where Australian companies are looking to their US counterparts and thinking “that is what we should be doing—taking 50% of the publishing”—however, they’re not paying the same per episode rate as the companies in the USA are paying. The pie that you are tapping into as a composer in Australia is substantially less than the equivalent show in the USA.

The upshot of the whole story is that now there is pressure on improving the composer rates and conditions, but they are always negotiable. Your negotiating will depend on your experience, how desperate you are for the work and your relationship with the producer and director.

We need to know what the values of those things are, i.e. the publishing rights and copyright. At the moment the AGSC’s procedure is to advise composers as best we can, not what rates they should be charging, but what they should protect, or try and protect, and what they should value. I personally treat my royalties like my super, and the production fee that I get per episode is my salary. My intellectual property, my copyrighted musical works are my legacy for my children. So that when I give away my publishing, I am giving away my children’s legacy—it is a very personal thing for me. It is not always the same for everyone else.

Michelle O’Donnell (MO):

What Clive said, a lot of it is very true. I would hazard to say that $4000 per episode is very high. If you moved outside the animation world, into the soap operas and the day-to-day TV drama, you’re doing very well to get $4000 for a half hour episode, it is obviously a lot worse. Particularly for the reality TV shows you’ll get a lot less.

The general consensus I get from the screen composers I talk to is that it’s tough out there, budgets are shrinking and it’s very hard. Another problem for film and television composers is the rise and rise of production music. I know we have had some discussions with the AGSC about this and are trying to come to terms with what we can do. What we have noticed in this distribution is that now a lot of television shows are using free or almost free production music. From our [APRA] point of view, every time someone uses production music, one of our composers loses a job. The other thing with a lot of production music in Australia is that it is foreign, so the backend royalties will not end up in Australia. I think Les Gock was interesting in his suggestion at the last AGSC meeting, coming up with “if you can’t beat them, join them”. I think composers need to think outside the box in terms of finding a way around that, or at least finding some extra work. There’s more and more people changing from being pop composers to being film and television composers, and there are not that many projects. In the last 12 months there has been a huge downturn in the spend on film music budgets, we’re hoping that it is just the global financial crisis. We’ve just done the judging for the Screen Awards and there has been a very big decrease in the number of film projects and that is across the board. In
documentary, short film (which I was surprised, a lot of it is self-funded) and the big one is jingles and advertisements, there are half as many jingles and ad campaigns last year as there was the previous year, so that’s got to be 50% less work. Having spoken to composers, this is true. A lot of [advertisers] just rehashed old campaigns, a lot of them didn’t have the money to start something else. So it’s another area where the film and television composers would go if there were not any work in film and television [but] in this instance it’s not actually there to provide a backstop for them that it used to.

Guy Gross (GG):

I am being controversial on purpose, but part of me, certainly not all of me, seems to think that quality is important, and I’m happy for you to attack me on that because another part of me thinks that it isn’t. Certainly some of what I create in my studio everyday is far from quality, it is functional music, and it serves a purpose and keeps my clients happy—if they want salt and fat, then that is what I give them, salt and fat. I am a functional composer, I occasionally get to make filet mignon, it just doesn’t happen very often. From a point of view of a composer who is seeking to create quality music, there is a dilemma here, which is very difficult to reconcile. Are we composers that are professionally trained and want to create high art music; or are we functional composers that simply do what we are asked to do, simply add the salt, fat and sugar to effectively sell that hamburger. I think that is why composers find themselves in that dilemma, and that dilemma extends into how professionally we take ourselves.

It’s no surprise that lawyers are so highly paid; their actual job is to negotiate like dogs, they’ve done that to themselves. Composers, we’re soft—that’s not what we’re trained to do—no one has trained us to negotiate hard, someone maybe trained us to play guitar, hopefully more than three chords.

It is the nature of musicians, we are not those hard-nosed negotiators.

Amanda Brown (AB):

I feel very much like the small-time composer up here tonight. I have only been composing for film for ten years. I am largely an individual, I work from a home studio. My home studio is in a tiny sunroom off the bedroom, I feel incredibly unprofessional at times when I have directors and editors and producers come around to my house for a music feedback session on works-in-progress. They literally have to squeeze into a room that holds no more than 3 people and walk through the bedroom on the way.

I guess I have been lucky. I have had a good run of interesting jobs, I am represented by a composer’s agent: his name is Norman Parkhill and he works mainly in feature films and television as a music supervisor. He has been my agent for probably 6 or 7 years now. Like me, he also came from the popular music world. He represents a small stable of around 10-12 composers, quite a diverse bunch of composers. I would say that on the whole he generates about 50% of my work and I generate the rest myself—just from relationships that I have built up with filmmakers who come back for repeat jobs or people who have coincidentally read about me from
someone or somewhere. He takes a 15% commission and 10% even if I generate the work. But the benefits of that are that he will negotiate contracts and budgets.

I do concur with people, even in my relatively small career span—budgets do seem to be getting smaller, year by year. The very first feature film that I did, I think the budget was AUD$40,000, which seemed like a huge amount of money to me at the time. It was such a problematic job, because it was my first job I was trying to do such a great job and I had all these grand ideas and I wanted to write a Magnolia style score—with songs written specifically for the film, collaborating with another songwriter. I think I only composed 18-20 cues of music and in the final film they ended up using 3.

The feature film I worked on this year Wog Boy II: The Kings of Mykonos, for which I had a co-composer, Nick West, I think that the fee for that film was $30,000 and we split it 3 ways. So it ended up being $10,000 each, and it was a lot more work. $10,000 for each composer and then a $10,000 budget for studio, mixing, musicians. I think it’s good to talk figures so people know what the reality is. Yes, it’s pretty appalling—that wasn’t including the music synch budget, I don’t know what that was actually. We did do a number of re-records of songs, so they just paid the publishing licence and not for the sound recording.

With this film, The Kings of Mykonos, we found out that we had the job about a month before the film was locked off. We had about 2 months to work on the project—which I think is pretty good. I like having that time before lock-off personally. I was engaged on the film primarily because they needed a lot of Greek music. Not knowing much about Greek music and being hired to write that, I had to do a lot of research and find some Greek musicians as well—which was enjoyable. But just getting back to the miniscule sounding budget, at the time, I tried to rationalize it. I knew it was not going to be like an incredibly artistic piece of auteur filmmaking—having seen bits of the first Wog Boy. I took the punt that the back-end royalties on a popular and commercially successful film would compensate for the small fee. I haven’t got the APRA on that yet, so I cannot tell you definitively, but maybe other people here can? With commercially successful films it can be a way to make some money. This was my first commercial film, the other ones I had worked on were very much art-house type feature films.

Just commenting on our industry at-large, I would say that it is very small. It is largely government subsidized, which is very different to the two big industries of Hollywood and Bollywood. Hence our pool of productions is really small—that’s kind of the opposite of where I came from which was the world of pop music. Pop music is a really capitalist private-enterprise, sink-or-swim kind of system.

To finish off on working as a composer and on a composing industry in general, I guess that probably Michelle would know better than I do that the majority of screen composers are like me: freelance individuals working in their own studios. There are some collectives, like Song Zu and Nylon, which are collections of half a dozen composers pooling their resources. Having the finances to be able to employ someone who can chase work for them but—in their cases—the money that keeps them afloat comes from advertising. As an individual I have quite deliberately chosen not to go down that road. Not
just idealistically because I am ideologically opposed to advertising but it’s just something that I have never really been interested in. I have to say I am not completely driven by ‘the money’ in chasing work. Hence, I have worked in a number of different jobs and I continue to supplement my film composing gigs with other gigs like being a session musician for other people, a bit of teaching, working as an engineer for community groups in the Bondi Pavilion. Also, for the last 20 years I have worked part-time as a library assistant, which I’ve actually consciously chosen to do—I have found that the world of music and screen composing is pretty male-dominated and the world of library work is pretty female-dominated—so I find it a good counterbalance in my working life.

There was a survey done by the Australia Council recently about artists and their incomes. The majority of artists have other jobs. I call them McJobs, because I am generation X and obviously the library is my McJob—but I find that McJobs also give you a certain amount of time away from sitting in the studio and constantly having to come up with the ‘creative goods’. Your brain can be free to imagine, research, be inspired by something outside the studio. Even though I am just down to one day a week at the library now—which shows that for me personally things are looking up—I still value that day.

Martin Armiger (MA):

First of all, money – for as long as I have been involved it’s been a sort of zero gross sum adventure, really. [With film composition] I started with nothing and ended with nothing and it seems as though nothing has changed. What we do is, we do something that we love doing and, as a result, we don’t have the money to put down on a house when we’re in our 20s, or we don’t have that thing that gets you organized so you can relax later on. Most of us don’t, I mean I have had friends in this who have made money early. But the money doesn’t ever seem to make sense. Except if you just keep on doing it eventually you get a bit back.

With all of the budgets, the producer never ever really says “how much do you want?” I say, “How much have you got?” Whether it is 30 grand or 100 grand, whatever it is and then I talk to Danielle [Weissner: assistant, co-worker] and she says I am crazy, “you can’t do this, get more money”. It never makes sense, I am really bad with money.

A lot of what we talk about is money and our working conditions and you’ve got a kind of academic thing and what you’re interested in is music in a theoretical way. What I’m trying to say is that the film and television industries are two very conservation institutions in a way. When you talk about the future of music and the future of film music you have this strange disjunction. This is partly because there is this need to keep the client happy, and the clients are trying to keep the network happy and the network is trying to keep the punters happy. So you don’t get this most exciting music coming into film, because you put it in and someone will go “what is that?!” This splintering of music into niches, for instance I love that Japanese feedback music – I could listen to that all night – but if you put

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1. Throsby and Hollister (2010).
that into a film, people will say, “what is that?!” There’s very few filmmakers who can listen to music that is weird and out there and stick it into the film. There are not many directors and producers who listen like that and are prepared to take a risk. Most of the time you’re being asked to “do something like…, be like this”, write the score like the temp tracks that they have been using. Do something that someone else has done 10 minutes ago and it’s not really exciting as music. I can remember a little while ago, someone telling me that their favourite music is film music, and I thought “really?” I mean at a dinner party it won’t get in the way, it’ll sit underneath the dialogue!

Jim Manzie (JM) (Audience member):

I have been pretty much involved in the factory system that is Hollywood, when you’re churning it out and you have to churn it out by 9:30am on Thursday otherwise you’re fired, that absolutely is the case in the system that I was working in. Although, I have to say throughout all that, there has to be a kernel of yourself, your self-belief and passion—things that inspired you about music to begin with.

You really do have an enormous responsibility to bring a lot of emotion to the film. A lot of the directors are looking for some guidance and some extra power for what they have worked on. I found it always to be a huge responsibility to be writing something which supports somebody else’s vision.

On the larger side of what you’re talking about with the business, I would say that things have been getting slower and consistently harder. The advent of midi after analogue made us learn new skills, we’ve had to continually re-adjust and learn new skills. Of course the producers have seen that there are tremendous opportunities for driving the race to the bottom in our industry. But what can you do? You just need to maintain that personal belief and love of your work. As Martin said, you get your first guitar and that’s what first gets you into it and, after 20 years of doing it over there, that’s what has kept me in it—just those little flashes of satisfaction and the understanding that what you’re doing is helping somebody else’s vision or helping the public really enjoy a piece of artistic cooperation.

Audience member - question:

Just in general, is there a big effect on composers with the use of popular songs in movies? I know that has been around for ages, but does it affect anything?

GG:

Some movies more than others.

MO:

They suck up your budget.
GG:

If you’re lucky it’s quarantined away from your production budget, if you’re unlucky it is included within it and there’s a whole big fee, “oh by the way there’s a Rolling Stones track that we’re going to use so we’re going to need 50 grand out of your budget”.

MA:

I think that the skill of writing a song is something that is invaluable if you’re going to do films. Songs are a great form, and to encapsulate something in a few minutes - a hook or drive or contour that will express that emotion in a concentrated form – it’s a great skill, gift and talent. We all write songs, sometimes we only write songs because the movie calls for one, but writing songs is a part of what we do. If we write a song it is a great advantage. I sometimes think we should spend more time on songs in our course here, because so many directors want them and so many producers want them and therefore if you can do it you’re in a better position.

AB:

Can I just say that I have written several songs for films, particularly for the films which have been collaborations with the director, often with the script. There has been collaboration on the lyrics, often they’ll provide the lyric and I will write the music. I find that very rewarding and a great way to work. Of course that song is going to be much more suitable for the film because it has been tailored for that purpose.

Danielle Weissner (DW) – Audience member:

Over the last ten years I have been working in music post and as a music production manager, taking care of some of the things involved in the business side of music for a composer, or assisting them with that at any rate.

It is apparent in this symposium, that the business end of this guild is not particularly being looked after and I think education is a key in how we present our budgets of what is required to compose music for films and how to make budgets work. Budgets are a key idea. If you want to have a future as a music composer, you must attend the business side. So not only do we need music supervisors, but we need music production managers and we need music editors. I think that should be looked at to innovate and move forward.

JS:

Just following up from that: is there resistance from composers to that because they see it as coming from their budget but not from the production budget?

DW:

When I am doing a budget, I actually factor myself in and above the budget, so the issue is to make the budgets a reality. Several times I have worked on
budgets before where producers do not pick up the phone anymore and say “what is your rate?”, they don’t ask facilities what their rate is. All I’m saying is pick up the phone. How much is a musician worth for a call, for a session, pick up the phone and ask the musician. Is it $250 an hour, $400 an hour—how much is it going to cost me to get my piano tuned?—don’t say, well it’s not in my music budget so I don’t have to do it, still factor it in if it needs to get paid for. When the film is being budgeted, 3 years before you’re ever going to come onto the film, producers need to be educated in actual fact.

Christopher Gordon (CG):

Can I just pick up on something there, I tend to do it all myself. I compose from the spreadsheet, almost literally—I watch the film, I break it down, I get an idea of how much music there is, what size orchestras we’ll need and that sort of thing. As a rule of thumb, we’ll probably get about 12 minutes of music recorded in one session, so then I know how many sessions I need to have. Not all of it is going to be big, some of it may be quite small, maybe just four players for one session and so on. I will work all of that out before I compose a single note. I then compose from it. When I am doing the stuff that is going to be big, I work on it until I have filled out that column then I move onto the next part. Gradually all the columns seem to fill out. I always do a spreadsheet. Generally I budget $275 per musician as an average, which includes a contractor’s fee, which is for an orchestra. Then there are extra little bits and things that you throw in. The point is though, that I do a spreadsheet and invariably I will come in, with budgets of around $50,000, [or] about $1000 under or over.

DW:

How much of a contingency do you include in your budget for the lock-off that never locks off?

CG:

That isn’t a part of my music budget, that is more to do with editing. So if they want to go on for ten years making changes, it’s not going to affect me. It’s in a different budget. That’s a standard American thing, the music editor is not a part of the music budget. [This is in my contract.]

The way that my jobs are, they pretty much always involve working with the orchestra. So you don’t re-cut that, you don’t re-do the orchestra – most changes I deal with are before that, generally on manuscript or before on your demonstrations that you have done on synthesizers. So [last minute edits impacting the score] don’t particularly affect my budgeting.

DW:

I think it’s really important, contracts, to define the terms under which everybody is able to work. Because what happens is you’ve got the squeeze to get it done at the end, and they’re still cutting the film, but you have to get it finished, even when there is no more money. Well, I’m sorry, but no more money, how does one eat?
GG:

There is a need for discussion of that holistic underpinning of composers and their conditions, their labour law – there needs to be a point where the composer says “no that’s not an acceptable fee, either find some more fees or I’m doing the score on the harmonica.”

DW:

But are you not looking for innovations or ways to bring the community together to make your conditions better? I’m just saying that this is just one thing you can all do to make it better.

Audience member:

Is it not a problem with the scarcity of work in Australia that there is always someone who is willing to do it for less than you are? Someone else who wants that experience. I know that, in advertising, people used to get paid to do demos, but people started saying well, we want that job so we’ll do that demo for free. So that used to be something that was paid but it is not anymore, it sort of seems like, unless everybody has the same controls for what they will and won’t do for that amount of money—which is what we were talking about how people won’t release the information on their rates—but unless everybody does that, then it does turn into a situation where people will do it for nothing to get experience. Then this brings the standard down, as there is no money to do it properly.

MO:

But that is consistent across the whole music industry.

GG:

So people need to consistently say no, and then call their friends and say, “if Joe Blogs calls you, say no”—it’s illegal but you should do it.

Audience member:

I live with a sound location recordist and a film production assistant who does a lot of running and various miscellaneous things during production. I have found that there is a tremendous disparity between their expectations and what producers know they have to pay them to get them out of bed, compared with post-production. I wonder if this is because there is somehow this rigid set of expectations. Maybe it is because line producers exist and they make sure that, if you’re a location sound recordist and you’re working on a feature, you must get paid this amount of money. Even my flatmate who is just out of uni will not negotiate because if they can’t afford her, then the next company will and there’s an understanding that you won’t get a good person unless you pay this much. There’s no undercutting.

GG:

The problem is, in music there are far too many variables. What’s the experience of the composer? What style of score is it? Do we retain the
publishing rights? Are they licensing just for Australia? There are all these variables, which means that 50 grand can buy you a score of varying size and quality depending on the film variables. Producers don't understand what their money is buying them, as composers we are a bit to blame for that. If we can try and quantify what a composer should get, for instance, is it a day rate that we're expecting? Most composers don't work as though it is a day rate, a lot of them don't like to think that they work at a day rate. Are you paid per bar, is it the duration of the music? It is just terrifying how many variables go into a score and then calculating how much it is worth.

JS:

Just to add to this topic, I worked on a shoot last year where the sound recordist and cameraperson were working and they are paid a day rate. In theory they are supposed to work an eight-hour day, but they were working 15-hour days, so they were actually getting paid half of what they should have been. So, while on paper it looks great for those people, I think that the reality is very very different.

GG:

So the producers will say, hire Joe because he works double the time but we can still pay him the same. You still have the same problem.

AB:

I don't know, but historically, location sound recordists and other sound people have had some sort of union background that have ensured those hourly rates. Musicians and composers, we don't have that and because we've all agreed that we're largely working as individuals, clearly we do need some kind of organized collectivism to mobilise and get in now before things get worse.

JS:

[I'd like to introduce] Lynn Gailey who used to work for the media, entertainment and arts alliance. She was also head of film development at the Australian Film Commission, so Lynn actually knows about the union area. Do you have any comments that you would like to make?

Lynn Gailey (LG) – Audience member:

I think that the most important thing is, it goes back to education. I remember in the 1980s and production managing feature films and I would get the budget and it would say “Art Department: Sets – allow 25,000, Props – allow 25,000, Locations – allow 25,000, Music – allow 50,000” and you would think, okay that’s a fat lot of help to no one, because what sort of items are they wanting? Do they want a studio build? Do they want a specific location? So you’re starting from a budget that is nonsense. There was a very big push in the 1980s to stop budgets being acceptable where they said things like “allow” – you would ask for a further breakdown, where is your sets, wardrobe make-up etc.?
GG:

But frankly, what producer knows the scope of the score before they get into it?

LG:

But what they should be doing is factoring it in, but they don’t, so they’re making ‘educated’ guesstimates—I mean it’s not rocket science to work out how much it is going to be per session with an orchestra, what size orchestra are you allowing for? These discussions need to be had with the director. A vision needs to be budgeted from the beginning. Music is in worse shape than most other sectors on a production, it is at the very end, the film might start with a 10% contingency, but you can bet your bottom dollar that, by and large, it is all gone on the last day of principal photography. Any money that can then be stolen gets stolen in editing and, by the time you’re heading towards music, there is nothing left, so I think that goes back to education. There needs to be a dialogue with the Screen Producers Association [of Australia: SPAA] to get some genuine rigour back into the way productions are budgeted.

CH:

[Comparing work opportunities in Australia to those in US or Europe] I don’t know if anyone has done any research in terms of numerical data. Guy raised an interesting point a year or so ago when we were wrestling with this whole rates card idea, he said “if we added up the total amount of every production in Australia we would come up with some finite figure and we could calculate from that finite figure the amount that is allocated to the music budget. Then if we use that figure, we could then take that total amount spend on music in Australia and compare that to the number of people that are putting their hands up and saying ‘I’m a screen composer’—we might find that there is not enough work to keep half of those people gainfully employed.”

My experience, from the people I know here, is that nearly all of those who work in the screen composition world have to augment their income somehow. Playing live gigs, playing on an album, teaching, working in a library, whatever. Whether we are worse off than the composers in LA would be very hard to find, because I am sure that every restaurant you went into you would find a film composer amongst the waiters.

I was thinking before this session started, I would like to ask of the people in this room, who could say that they make more than the basic wage from writing screen music? That’s about $30,000 a year. As the president of the AGSC, I would love for most of my members to make as much as my plumber. There are few and far between that do, I am one of the lucky ones, but it terrifies me that so many people, far more talented than I, don’t have any work.

From talking to the composers that I met with in Canada, France, London, they were all complaining of a lack of work and it is a battle for all of them, whether it is worse there, I don’t know. I know that there is far more work in Hollywood than there is here, but there are also far more composers. There’s
the possibility of being a bigger fish in a smaller ocean here, so perhaps it is easier to get noticed here. So there might not be thousands of people competing for the work, there may just be hundreds or twenties or tens. I don’t know if there has been any quantitative survey. The general feeling that I got from my trip is that it is tough. The interesting thing is when the lyricists union started talking about joining up with the teachers union in LA, people like Alf Clausen (the guy who wrote background music for The Simpsons) submitted an article to the guild of screen composers over there to the effect that the money that is being tossed around now, amortised for the cost of living, is 18% of what it was in the 1980s. The way he based that was on the fact that back then he was being paid a composer’s fee and all the orchestra, copying, studio hire, was all being paid by the production house. His fee was quantified. So if he took that figure that he was getting paid as a composer and did the CPI for 30 years, the rate that he would get now would be 6 times what it was. But now he is being asked to do everything within that budget, delivering a finished product to the production house.

The 18% was just his example, but when I read that, I thought about how I was doing a lot of advertising music in the 1970s and 80s as a session musician. I know some of the figures that the composers were getting for the big ads back then and I know people now are not getting that kind of money. I can give you an example, I played bass for a TV commercial which was 60 seconds to the book, and I know that the budget for the 60 second TV commercial was AUD$30,000 for the music, which was in 1979/80 or thereabouts. I don’t do commercials these days, but I do know that, if there are any people that do commercials here, they would jump at the chance of doing a job like that.

CG:

Now they want to give you $30,000 for the score on a feature film.

Conclusion

While the Screen Music Futures symposium covered additional topics to the above transcription extracts, this article has focused on the discussions and debates about income-generation for screen music composers in the future. Various problems and issues were raised related to the current state of the industry and generated subsequent discussions in other forums. Although no fixed solutions were offered, each speaker offered their own perspective on deriving income from screen composing. The training of composers to work within budgets and to deal with financial aspects of contracts is a priority for the future, and additional research and debate may yield further strategies for deriving realistic income from screen composition.

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2 Amanda Brown proposed the following additional strategies in a subsequent AGSC discussion: 1) Attract additional payments for digital content delivery by various means. This requires assisting APRA to lobby government to impose a levy on computer hardware and MP3 players to compensate copyright owners for illegal downloads; 2) Strengthen the AGSC by aligning more closely with other professional associations and achieving quality status for members as a way of improving rates of pay; 3) Market post-production in Australia to attract and retain on-shore services; and 4) Investigate superannuation and health benefits indexed to income for composers.
The full transcription of this event may be requested through the Australian Guild of Screen Composers.

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