FROM ROCK TO REEL
An Interview with Screen Composer Neville Copland

Henry Johnson

Abstract

The Dunedin-based film music composer Neville Copland is interviewed with the aim of identifying his introduction to composing for screen, his compositional techniques and the influences on his compositional style. As one of several Dunedin-based composers who has had a prolific output primarily for documentary production company, Natural History New Zealand, Copland reveals details of his creative life related to screen sound production. From the influences of rock music in his younger years as part of life in rural New Zealand, to his career as a film music composer, Copland’s work shows many traits that offer a greater understanding about screen composition in the south of New Zealand’s South Island. Offering a resourceful approach to technology, as well as a support network and collaborators, Copland shows that screen music is produced in many different ways. His particular approach has developed from his own practice rather than a set of conventions or specific training.

Keywords

Documentary film, film music, Neville Copland, New Zealand, Dunedin sound

Introduction

Neville Copland was born in Palmerston North, New Zealand in 1963, before moving as a child to Gore in Southland on the South Island of New Zealand. He spent his early years living on his family’s farm in this rural part of New Zealand, and then moved to Dunedin, just north of Gore, to study at university and then commence his career as a screen composer and performing musician.

Music was a very important part of Copland’s early family life. The youngest member of a large musical family, he started learning the piano at the age of six. By the time he was 13 he was performing with family members in local cabaret bands, then at 15 years old, he had formed his own pop band. In 1981 he became an Associate of the Trinity College of Music, London, gaining their Performer’s Diploma (ATCL) in classical piano.

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Copland moved to Dunedin to take a Bachelor of Music with Honours beginning in 1982 at the University of Otago. At university, he specialized in classical piano performance and composition, studying with pianist Terence Dennis and opera and song-cycle specialist John Drummond. After graduating in 1985, Copland was soon working as a music director for the children’s television program, *Play School*, which was produced from the Television New Zealand (TVNZ) building in Dunedin (it ran from 1975 to 1990). He had initially enrolled for a PhD in Music, but decided not to continue his postgraduate studies and instead focused on his professional career in music.

As well as having a public profile in music as a live performer (keyboards), especially more recently with the semi-professional Dunedin-based Oxo Cubans (covering many styles of music), Copland’s main employer since 1987 has been Natural History New Zealand (first called Natural History Unit of TVNZ), which is now a global documentary film production company based in Dunedin. It is owned by Fox (Fox International Channels, a subsidiary of the Fox Entertainment Group), and has been making factual television programs since 1978 (after being founded in 1977).

Copland’s compositional career has seen various honours. At an early age, he was runner up in the Westpac School Music contest in 1979 for his song, ‘No Reason At All’. More recently, his talents in composition were recognised in 2007 when he was awarded the Mozart Fellowship at the University of Otago (offering full-time employment as a composer-in-residence for one year). Moreover, Copland has won various national and international awards for his film music compositions. His work has achieved national success in the Aotearoa Film and Television Awards (formerly called New Zealand Film and Television Awards) four times: Best Music for TV in 1994 for *Solid Water Liquid Rock* (Single, 1993); Best Original Music for TV in 1996 for *Sex on the Reef* (Hedley and Kelley, 1993); Best Original Music in 1999 for *Hillary: View From The Top* (in 1998; Carlaw, 1997); and Best Original Music in 1999 for *Dolphins of the Shadowland* (Hedley, 1998). His most recent large-scale work, *The Insatiable Moon* (Riddell, 2010), was a finalist in the category Best Music in a Feature Film at these same awards in 2011. Internationally, he received a Gold Medal for Excellent Music at the Prix Leonardo in the Italian Film Festival for *Sex on the Reef* (1995). His music was used on the Emmy-winning *The Crystal Ocean* in 2000 (Single, 1999b).

Copland’s film music oeuvre covers three main areas: works for *Play School*; works for documentary film, especially for the *Wild South* series; and works for feature films. While his early career saw him employed on *Play School*, by far his greater volume of works are with documentary film for Natural History New Zealand. The article is based on primary research comprising an interview with Copland conducted in December 2011. Following a discussion with the composer about his music, a semi-structured interview was carried out and recorded. The aim of the interview was to foreground the composer himself; to give focus to this practitioner as a way of allowing him to speak about his work and to voice his own experiences. The interview was transcribed and then edited based on notes made before and during the interview, and following feedback on the article by Copland himself.

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2 On the Oxo Cubans, see their website at www.oxocubans.co.nz.

3 On Natural History New Zealand, see their website at www.nhnz.tv.

4 The research process for this article was undertaken with the approval of the University of Otago Ethics Committee.
This article comprises several parts, based on distinct themes that were the focus of the interview. These are: background; screen composition; compositional techniques and style; equipment; and composer identity. While each is given different emphasis in terms of depth and length, as a whole they reflect a retrospective view of a composer’s oeuvre.

This article extends my previous work in documentary film music composition (Johnson, 2010) and builds on dispersed literature in the field of documentary film music (ranging from Kubik, 1945, and Huntley, 1947: 100-28; to Legard, 1993; Peyrière, 1994; Corner, 2002, and Intellect’s Studies in Documentary Film journal 2007-11, edited by Deane Williams). The aim of this article is to explore Copland’s creative career in screen sound that encompasses a considerable body of work on documentary. More specifically, the article provides an edited interview with Copland that has the intention of identifying his introduction to composing for screen, his compositional techniques and the influences on his compositional style.

Background

Henry Johnson (henceforth HJ): What got you into composing for screen? Could you say something about your background in music?

Neville Copland (henceforth NC): Well, I decided I was going to be a professional musician in some form about the age of six, and I was always told, that’s great for a back up but get a trade. You know, my mum wanted me to be a doctor I think and I said no it’s going to be something to do with music. I started piano at six, but I was fiddling around writing tunes and making my own stuff up, improvising, at least a year before that.

I grew up on a farm [in Gore], but all my brothers were in rock bands. They were farmers during the day and then they’d go out and play Led Zeppelin on Friday and Saturday night because in Gore there were two cultures: you either sat in the centre parks and got drunk on beer, or you joined a band. There wasn’t much else to do. [It was a] lot more fun playing in a band so I grew up surrounded by music - eight kids and seven of us played. I’m the youngest so I was just saturated. But I got pinpointed at an early age as having some sort of musical gift so I didn’t have to do as much farm work as the others, but I did have to work at my piano practice instead.

HJ: What was the name of the pop band you formed as a teenager? Did any of those musicians go on to work with you later on (or with others)?

NC: It was called ‘Peasant’. We felt our audiences of drunken rugby players and so on were largely musical peasants and it was a bit of an in-house joke between us. I remember a drunken fellow asking if we were called “The Pheasants” once. I remember another seeing my Fender Rhodes 73 and thinking we were called “Rhodes” as well. You see now why we made the joke perhaps. None of that band went on to work in the soundtrack field, though my brother’s drummer friend (my brother Steve was our bass player) from a former band, Richard Hodgkinson, went on, along with Murray Burns from Invercargill, to do soundtracks for Beyond International in Sydney, in particular the Beyond 2000 series. They were both members of the band Mi-Sex.
HJ: Do you ever get back down to Gore?

NC: Yeah, I actually just played at the Christmas in the Park event. I filled in for my brother because he was playing keyboards with a band doing Christmas in the Park when he slashed his index finger the other day.

HJ: You don’t have anything to do with the country music down there?

NC: No, not much. I have friends who are involved, but it’s never been a particular interest for me. I appreciate great music in any genre, but my recollections of the Gold Guitar Awards [a country music competition held annually in Gore] in my youth are not of great country music. I’ve heard it’s improved a lot since, and of course the whole country genre is far more diversified now than it was in Gore in the 1970s.

HJ: What type of music do the Oxo Cubans play?

NC: A wide range—jazz, blues, funk, rock and country rock. Fairly mainstream stuff. There’s no overlap with the Oxo Cubans repertoire and my screen work.

Screen Composition

HJ: What got you into composing for screen?

NC: Well, fresh out of varsity in 1986, I then started doing a PhD with John Drummond [Professor of Music at the University of Otago]. I had a scholarship for the year and I was trying to figure out what I should do a PhD on and at first it was going to be Charlie Parker. And then I went off that idea. I realized that I didn’t want to write about other musicians for the next five, ten years. I actually wanted to go out and write music myself. So I bought a Tascam portastudio [four-track cassette recording device] and went knocking on businesses’ doors to pester them about letting me write a jingle for them. Soon after, I set up a studio. A few ‘Dunedin Sound’ bands came through the studio and other people would come in and record their songs there as well. Kevin Lynch [Dunedin-born entertainer] used to record a lot of jingles there, and the few jingles I wrote were my first compositions for payment.

HJ: Were your jingles for radio or television?

NC: Both...firstly for radio, then mainly for TV. But one of the ones I wrote right back then is still playing on the radio today and it’s ‘Hey Diddly Doll, the VW’s up the Pole’. They’ve now been playing it for at least twenty-five years, and I just asked them last week if they would want to think about maybe bringing it a wee bit more up to date, but they don’t want to touch it. They seem to think it’s a bit of an icon around here and they might lose something if I modernized it, so unfortunately there was just the one-off payment for that. If you lived in Auckland of course they would be renewing it every six months to a year, so you would have had thirty jobs off it rather than one, but not so in Dunedin.

The first jingle I wrote was for a friend of mine who had a music shop, and that was pretty bad. My first longer-form commission was for the Phys-Ed Department [at the University of Otago]. They were doing a program for sedentary adults and they needed thirty minutes of exercise music, so I whipped that up in a week or two and
recorded that down at what is now the Music Department Studio in Albany Street, and that was pretty much my first full studio experience recording of my own music (I had played on an album or two before that). That led on to Natural History New Zealand [originally TVNZ’s Natural History Unit], which was just starting up. (I dropped them off a copy as a demo.) During this time, about a year after my studio had been going, my friend Murray Wood from Christchurch (he’d been working on Play School in Christchurch) said Play School is coming to Dunedin, and I should audition. He said it paid really well and it did. There were two positions going, one for each team, and Graeme Perkins and I were chosen. We were paid as Musical Directors because we were the sole musicians on each team; it was part of the union rules at the time. And that was my introduction to TV, and Play School was a learning ground for all sorts of TV people. You had to do it all off the cuff. It was like, okay, we’ve just finished this poem and you need twenty seconds to get to the clock. Okay here we go, what’s the theme? Hmm, trees, okay, trees. So you do something swirly like wind through the trees, then you would transition into another segment, or maybe into the intro of a new song, for example. And you did all that live, and it was mostly improvisation.

About two years into that, the Wild South (series) was just starting. Andrew Penniket was directing a film and he asked if I wanted to try and put some music to it. It was all in the same building. Wild South was just one floor up from Play School. I got the chance to prove that I could do other stuff (apart from exercise music) with The Tale of the Crayfish (Penniket, 1989). It was a really nice film and on the basis of that I went out and bought a sampler and a couple of synthesizers, and one thing led to another. Play School finished about a year after that, but by that stage Rod Morris (film director and producer) had seen The Tale of the Crayfish, and he was doing his next film and needed music, and then his mate who had seen that was also doing a couple of films. Before long I had half a dozen films under my belt and I was starting to build up a client base of five or six different directors. They would make a film about every two years, so you’d do the film and then halfway through it they’d say, “oh by the way I’ve got another one coming up next year which you might be interested in”. So I never had to advertise because there was constant work there for a good fifteen or sixteen years. In those days we were competing with the BBC and they had these beautiful sound tracks with a real orchestra and so on. But of course they had ten times the budget that we had. The BBC could afford to send a cameraman into the field and have him sit there for three months waiting for the perfect shot, whereas our guys got maybe three days.

The compositional side of Natural History almost moved to Auckland at one stage, but Michael Stedman stopped this. Michael backed the locals including myself, and he said I think we can do all this in Dunedin, and we did. We were competing very well on the world stage with the BBC and other production companies, winning awards alongside them, but on about a tenth of the budget. We were so proud that a bunch of folk from a little town at the bottom of the world was competing with the guys in London or Bristol, and doing pretty damned well.

HJ: Were/Are you an actual ‘production house’ composer for NHNZ or were/are you contracted in for each project?

NC: Formally contracted. But I had my studio in the basement of the NHNZ building during the busiest part of my career, and the directors would drop in on a regular basis since I was on the premises.

HJ: Is there any pressure to produce music with short notice?
NC: Yeah. You got a great joy out of it because you knew the person who had filmed it and edited it, and then you bring it to life with music. They watch it with you and you see their reaction. All of a sudden it's like their baby, but you've brought it to life. It's really satisfying, but also when you get into a situation where you've got to do forty minutes of music in three weeks, you just can't do the same level of detail anymore.

HJ: Do you think the pressure takes away the pleasure?

NC: It does, yeah. It’s a great motivator, the deadline, but it causes a lot of stress as well.

**Compositional Techniques and Style**

HJ: How do you compose?

NC: First I just look at the pictures, and sometimes I wait until I've got my keyboard on. I'll probably set up a piano sound, maybe just a string patch, and I might watch it once through without playing anything and just try and focus on the mood. What is the mood of this scene? What’s the pace of it? Where does it change? Where does it peak? How’s the cue shaped? Does it start off quietly and then peak there? And then come back down and then change into that scene or is it out of the blocks, bang? You know, first frame we’re into something really big. So the first thing you do is just try and gauge the mood and the pace, and then you get maybe a rhythm forming. You might get a rhythm that you're feeling from what they've edited, or maybe it’s just very ambient and there’s no rhythm at all, there’s just a certain atmosphere. Location is very important. It might be based in Indonesia so I need to give it a gamelan sound. I did a *Wild Asia* documentary series once and that was quite challenging at times. They didn't want totally pure ethnic music from that region, but they wanted a hint of it so that allowed me to do Western harmonies, putting a melody with a certain type of flute that they have in that area, or certain types of drums, which would just give a hint of the location. A purist would think that’s bastardizing that culture, and they may be right, but to me it was just tipping the hat to the culture. It was trying to make that music palatable to that average Western audience. If you do put pure local music to the documentary, the intended audience may well find it a bit much.

Then it’s talking to the director and making sure that the pace and the mood that you’ve got in your head is what he’s thinking.

HJ: How do you go about that with the director? What type of negotiations do you have?

NC: You just run through it and say what you are conveying through the track. In the early days I would ask the director where they wanted the music. I stopped asking that after a while because in some cases I felt I became a better judge of where music should be than they were. After all, I could experiment with the options day in, day out, and usually their choices were fairly obvious once you learned how they thought. Most directors don’t have the musical vocabulary that a composer has, and as time went on most chose to give less and less direction and let me have more control in that creative input. That trust has to be earned over time for a composer, though.
HJ: How does the music work with the voice-over and location sound?

NC: Preferably seamlessly! Often I only have a script to work with, and a rough one at that, so the chances of extra narration being added, which would conflict with a busy music passage, are high. It pays to have as much info about what's happening sound wise overall as possible, to avoid conflicts. Good planning early on in the post-production stage can minimize these difficulties. If possible I would get a rough narration recorded as early on as possible so as to be able to write around it. To have a final narration to write to is a rare treat, as the final script is usually still being written while you are writing the music.

HJ: Do you have any contact with soundies [ie other sound personnel such as recordists, designers, editors] for the docs?

NC: Absolutely. That's very important for the overall soundtrack process. For example, there may be a huge storm sequence and the soundie may have decided to spend a lot of time on it to make it massive with many tracks of wind sound. If I try to write a big storm cue to it as well, one of us is going to have to turn down in order to hear both. A good pre-planning meeting with the soundie, as well as frequent updates to each other can avoid a lot of potential problems. There's nothing worse than spending days on a huge cue only to find that the soundie would prefer to hear his meticulously recorded wind effects instead; or to find that there's been script added all over it as well, and you are now finding all that work is being left on the cutting room floor, so to speak. Best to work it out beforehand and each player take their moment in the spotlight.

HJ: Do you use any animal noises incorporated into the music? Real or sampled?

NC: I have done, sparingly. The idea sounds nice in theory, but in practice often sounds contrived. I prefer to incorporate musical imitations of animal sounds.

HJ: Regarding New Zealand sound, is your music influenced by any New Zealand natural sounds (for example, bird noises), either as written into melodies or used as samples?

NC: No. But I did have to construct a sound from human renditions of a Tasmanian Tiger once, to give an impression of what the Tasmanian Tiger may have sounded like. There were half a dozen folk who had recorded their renditions of what they say it sounded like. They were all completely different. One sounded like she was choking on a chicken bone. It was the worst audio job I ever remember doing.

HJ: Which 'story' does the music work with (for example, a story about wildlife under threat has a 'sad' or 'danger' theme)?

NC: You work with the story of the scene, rather than the overall story. Even a tragic story will usually have its joyful moments. It's nice to keep a hint of the overall story throughout though, in the form of a certain sound or motif perhaps.

HJ: Can the music convey a different mood or idea to what the voice-over is saying?

NC: Definitely. That's when the music comes into its own. It's a delicate balance though, when you are painting a different background to the script. Go too far and
it feels simply wrong. Get it right and it adds a real depth to the drama that no other element can.

HJ: Do you just deliver the music and it’s used in the soundtrack as is, or is it adjusted or changed in the final editing process?

NC: It’s usually been written to sit in a particular place, but sometimes a director might change a part of it, particularly to sit around dialogue that has been added or moved.

HJ: So why do we need music on a documentary film, a wildlife film?

NC: Have you ever watched one without it? If you go a whole hour without music it can, frankly, get very boring.

HJ: Why do you think that is? Why do you think we need music for a documentary film?

NC: That’s a good question. Music brings it to life because there usually isn’t enough emotion just in the pictures to actually have a fulfilling experience of viewing. We need our emotions to be triggered to tell us how to interpret the image. We certainly have got very used to it. I think when it’s not there we kind of miss it. For an extended period of time, if there’s nothing it feels just too matter of fact. If there’s a bunch of wildlife images with just a narrator saying these geese are going to such and such and now there are fifty million of them doing this and doing that, it just becomes a whole lot of facts and figures and you don’t engage with it emotionally. It draws us in emotionally. What else but sound can do that?

HJ: Do you think you have a compositional style?

NC: Yeah, I do have my signature. People can hear it’s me. We’ve all got our favourite chord progressions, the way we approach the phrasing, the certain attack you put on a note and so on.

HJ: How would you describe your signature, your identity and style?

NC: I love some classical music, but I grew up surrounded by rock music, and the music that most grabbed me as a youngster was progressive rock. My favourite band ever is a Dutch band called Focus, founded [in 1969] by Thijs van Leer [b. 1948]. And they had a great guitarist called Jan Akkerman [b. 1946]. Van Leer played Hammond organ, and they did some stunningly beautiful stuff. They were all classically trained musicians, but they played rock. So I love to bridge that gap between classical and rock to some extent too. All their albums used to sell in Gore and I ran into the guy who used to distribute them for New Zealand, and he said we always had this unusual amount of Focus albums ordered from Gore. It must have been my family and friends buying them all ‘cause we were mad on them. My brothers played all their music. ‘Hocus Pocus’ [1971] was a big hit of theirs, but the lesser known ones like those on the Focus 3 album (1972) are better works. In terms of rock music, they’re very complex pieces.

HJ: So would you say that your compositional style has a rock influence?

NC: Yeah, very much.
HJ: How can we hear that in your music?

NC: The textures that I put together. I’ll have a string line for example, and behind it I’ll have Hammond holding chords. Maybe a big sort of Hans Zimmer [film composer, b. 1957] type orchestral theme, but there will be lead guitars doubling the melody with an oboe or something, and rock drums and bass underneath the orchestra. Another favourite band of mine was Supertramp [UK rock band formed in 1969] and I always loved the track ‘Fool’s Overture’ [1977]. It’s the one that’s got quotes from Winston Churchill speaking in it [from his 4 June 1940 House of Commons speech]. It’s a soundtrack as much as a song. You can hear definite Supertramp influences in some of my music, particularly the sixteenth-feel keyboard style, which you hear in, say, ‘Dreamer’ [1975] or ‘Child of Vision’ [1979].

I was very keen on that whole prog rock thing, simply because I was surrounded by it at home. By the time I was eighteen and came to Dunedin [to study music at university] I had never heard an orchestra play in my life. I had never heard a jazz pianist play in my life, and I was starting a music degree.

HJ: Let’s look more closely at a few of your works. Can you tell me more about the feature film you recently wrote music for, The Insatiable Moon [Rosemary Riddell, 2010]?

NC: Well, that was very sparse and I used just a lot of acoustic piano, although for logistical reasons I went out and bought the best electronic piano sounds I could find, which in the context of the movie sounded fine. Edits are always changing and you could go and write a piece and then you need to change it or re-record it. That’s a hassle in Dunedin as there isn’t a studio with a decent piano in it here. There was a particular piano sound I was after as well, and it’s probably the David Foster [Canadian composer, b. 1949] sound. He’s a big time producer in the States, and probably my favourite producer. He’s written literally hundreds of hits but people here have never heard of him because he’s a man behind the scenes. He wrote many of Chicago’s [formed in Chicago in 1967] hits, for example. He’s been a big influence on me. He’s a perfectionist and he’s very slick so you’ve got to be careful not to get too tinkly or too slick or it loses its organic nature. Down here in good old New Zealand, and particularly in Dunedin, we can’t go that far with trying to do that American sound or you’ll be asked to change it. I love his stuff, but I wouldn’t go as slick as he does because you have to try and retain that organicness in your music or it just gets a bit superficial.

HJ: Is there a highlight for you in The Insatiable Moon?

NC: There are a couple. One of the highlights is the opening theme where I borrowed with permission the opening line of ‘Te Ku Te Whe’ [1994, by Hirini Melbourne and Richard Nunns]; it’s just a beautiful melody. We tried to re-record something very similar but on the day Richard wasn’t feeling well and the long phrases are very physically demanding. We ended up choosing the pre-recorded version, and under that I did some typical Baroque harmonies and Richard mentioned at the time it hadn’t been combined before with his music. And it just worked, really nicely, a beautiful blend, so I’m quite proud of that. And there is the moon theme. It’s simply a D with C bass going to a G minor over a B flat, but I had some added notes in there as well, but its the voicing that I particularly liked. Nothing complex, but it just hit the spot for the moon motif in a special way to me.

HJ: Do you play on these themes throughout the movie?
NC: Yes, the motivic stuff is very important, I think. You can overdo it. You can have little motifs floating around everywhere and it’s too much, but for just a few main points or characters it’s good to have them to tie it all together or you can end up with a less than unified result.

HJ: What about your compositional style in some of your documentary films?

NC: I’ve written for Katabatic (Single, 1999a), which was about the wind that flows down from the South Pole and it’s a journey of that wind. Another one by Michael Single around the same time is The Crystal Ocean, which is about icebergs predominantly. He got an Emmy for his cinematography for The Crystal Ocean. It’s a stunning looking film so it was a joy to write music for it. All of his work is fun to work on and I’ve been quite blessed that he’s stuck with me pretty much through his whole career and has always given me the first option to compose for his work. And it’s always inspiring work.

HJ: How would you describe your compositional style in documentary films like that?

NC: It’s quite diverse, often it’s just very ambient chords and atmospheric. Brian Eno [b. 1948], Vangelis [b. 1943] sort of ambient stuff. I’d often take that approach because anything with rhythm or even a tune would seem too much. Sometimes you have to pin it down to just one chord floating in and out and then repeat it. It has to be so subtle sometimes that anything more than that would seem to upset the balance. Conversely, there are documentary films I’ve worked on such as Sex on the Reef [Hedley and Kelley, 1993] where I got extremely detailed. It was painstaking but very satisfying work. Synchronisation using MIDI sequencing was a huge breakthrough at that time [early 1990s]. When I first started doing docos, I was not synced to the video of the film at all and it was impossible to get frame accuracy, so when the technology suddenly allowed me to trigger musical events on particular frames of the movie I made the most of it. That accuracy took my work to another level and it was very exciting at the time.

HJ: When you play the music back to the director, I guess there’s some negotiation going on, is there?

NC: You learn how to sound them out. In the early days when I was greener I would take things in a certain direction without checking with them and think, oh this is marvellous. Then I’d get them in and they’d go, oh it’s not really my thing. And you’d be gutted because you’d spent two days writing something that you thought was great, and it did work great, but it just wasn’t their thing. So the first thing you have to do is actually take their musical taste into account because even though you think you’ve written something that’s a great piece, if it’s not their cup of tea then, sorry bud, do it again.

Equipment

HJ: What equipment do you use nowadays?

NC: I’ve got a good collection of orchestral libraries, and I’m running an iMac. I used to have a thirty-two channel console. I’ve now just got a tiny four-channel console I use only for monitoring. So much more is done ‘in the box’ these days that most composers have downsized accordingly.
HJ: What kind of software do you use?

NC: I’m writing with Logic Pro, and Pro Tools. I’ve got the Complete Composers Collection from EastWest among other libraries.

HJ: Can you give me a bit more info on the sound libraries you draw on, and how that works in terms of composing credits?

NC: I’ve always sought out the best sounds I could find. Spectrasonics (Eric Persing) has always done great stuff. I purchased the Heart of Asia discs for the Wild Asia series. Those sorts of samples with actual phrases that are matched tonally and tuning-wise are invaluable when you have to quickly construct an ethnic sounding cue. Especially in this part of the world where you cannot ring up your local erhu virtuoso like you might be able to in say, LA. In terms of credits, most the libraries only want credits in feature films, they don’t worry about TV and documentaries so much. You have the right to use the sounds in your own compositions without further credit or payment to the library provider.

HJ: What is the Complete Composers Collection from EastWest and why is that an essential tool for you?

NC: It’s a software bundle. About 10 or so different products, one of which is the orchestral library. It was essential to me when I bought it a few years ago as it was state of the art and covered many of the sound palettes I wanted. But one is continuously updating these things, and the libraries all compete with each other to be the latest and greatest.

HJ: What sort of keyboard do you use?

NC: Many. My main work keyboard was a Kurzweil K-2500X for many years. These days I have a Yamaha S90XS and a Korg Kronos. I’ve owned Roland D-70, D-50, Korg M1, Triton, Yamaha DX7 etc. I used to stick with the Kurz as my ‘mother keyboard’ and just trigger racks of synth modules with it. The reps from those companies used to always drop by the studio with the latest stuff, be it Roland, Korg, Emu, Yamaha etc. It was great to have access to the latest sounds on these machines and to buy them at wholesale prices as well. Trouble is they always had some fabulous new sound that every other composer wanted to put in their new

Figure 1: Neville Copland in his screen sound production studio. (Image courtesy of the artist.)
soundtrack as well. Many a time I have heard a track on TV and told my wife the bank and patch # it came from. For example, Soundtrack... D50...# I37. The same thing happened with samples and new libraries. The Peter Gabriel shakuhachi is a particularly famous cliché. I used it on an early doco and have cringed every time I’ve heard it back since. You learn to avoid the real favourites so that didn’t happen to you—either use in conjunction with other sounds, or edit it in some way to customise it.

HJ: Do you work with live instrumentalists much, or mainly with samples?

NC: Samples mainly. Depends on the time allowed. When you have an afternoon to compose and complete a mix of a one-minute piece you don’t have two hours to get a guitar track down. Unless you have musicians who are used to recording the perfect take on the second or third attempt you are going to run out of time trying to get it right and then editing it if its not. I used to use instrumentalists on jingles more, as you had more time to commit to those. And vocalists are quite handy on jingles too! Though I sometimes sang them myself, or got my wife Marjolein to. She is a General Practitioner but does a bit of singing as a hobby.

HJ: Where do you record the instrumentalists? Is there a studio at NHNZ or do you use your own?

NC: When I had my studio at home I used that. I moved and worked in a MIDI studio mainly, and would do a little bit of acoustic recording in the control room on headphones, or would use the NHNZ studio. Once recording without tape was the norm it was very easy to transport files from one system to another. Not so easy if you needed to find a multi-track with compatible tape-size and noise reduction system like in the early days.

HJ: Do you ever use Sibelius?

NC: I’ve never used it. Because I play all the parts in myself as I compose. If I needed to record real orchestra live I would use it then.

HJ: Has anyone ever asked you for a score?

NC: Well, I write out a chord chart if a guitarist is coming in, but usually if they’re in the studio I’d play them the melody. I might write it out, but a lot of them don’t read much anyway. I just play it for them and take it from there really.

Identity

HJ: Do you think there’s any sound of New Zealand in your music? Or even local sounds of Dunedin?

NC: Not really, no. In a lot of New Zealand documentaries there would always be a sequence of Māori artefacts in a museum or something like that. There would often be an historical sequence that needed indigenous music. I’d have a few big long phrases of a nose flute, and that’s probably about as indigenous as I got to be honest.

There might be a certain something in my music that I don’t pinpoint as being New Zealand. Growing up on a farm, I’ve always had some connection with the land.
When I see the old hills I used to muster on I realize there is an emotive connection there, so that might come through [in my music], but I don’t know if it would come through any different in me as it would a guy living in Colorado. He’ll also feel a connection with his land and what’s going to be different about my strings or my chord voicings to his, apart from some indigenous instruments that you can automatically identify as New Zealand? The thing that most identifies New Zealand sound in some ways might be just a sort of a roughness about it, something a bit more organic perhaps.

Conclusion

This article has indicated some of the personal ideas behind the creative screen compositions of Dunedin-based film music composer Neville Copland. Through an extensive interview with the author, Copland has provided much personal information on his musical background, his entry into a career as a documentary and feature film music composer, some of his compositional techniques and style, the equipment and software he uses, and his sense of musical identity.

Copland noted in particular his hometown of Gore as influencing his musical identity. He grew up there, in the south of the South Island of New Zealand, in a musical family. While he learnt classical piano on a formal basis, his everyday musical influences were primarily from progressive rock music that seemed to surround his everyday family life and local context. He plays keyboard and was performing, improvising and composing music from an early age. The farming context of his early years still has much influence on him, and he identifies a ‘roughness’ in his music that draws from rock music and the resourceful and self-initiating attitude of those around him.

A formal university training in music (not specifically screen composition) led Copland to a career in television and documentary film making, where he has been in much demand as a screen composer. He has also moved into film music composition, with his most recent work achieving success nationally.

Even though he works very closely with the filmmakers when composing for film, his early musical influences can be heard within a sometimes ambient mood contrasting with a combination of classical musical sounds and lead guitar. Copland achieves success by adding sonic emotion to the accompanying images. Whether his music shows influences from prog rock or reflects an indigenous affinity with the land, as he notes, Copland uses documentary film music to “bring it all to life”.

References


**Discography**


**Filmography**


