

*For SCL's SCORE*

## ***Making It Last***

**By  
Michael Isaacson**

The most challenging part of a film composer's task is contributing a durable, organic, musical score after the other designers have had the opportunity to infuse their creative stylistic elements and ideas upon the collaboration.

Traditionally, in the post-production chain the music comes last and, because of this clean-up position, there are too often unenviable assortments of non-organic (political, commercial, or financial), errors, weak decisions, or unfortunate choices that are passed down to the composer to be "fixed" by the "right" music. For example:

**Financial:** A "box-office" star actor is hired who insists on "creative input" and loves the wrong music for all the wrong reasons.

**Political:** The producer's tone-deaf daughter keeps nudging him to sing the title song until, for the sake of domestic tranquility, he acquiesces.

**Commercial:** A recording artist, retained to perform the theme song to increase crossover sales, insists on his rock song (s) being used (even though the film takes place in Elizabethan England).

You get the idea. Because the composer is last in line he or she too frequently inherits "the ill wind".

What can be done? Before this sticky wicket is addressed let's make it crystal clear what can't be done. Composers may be skilled musicians, dramatists, and maintain cutting-edge computer studios, but they are not magicians performing a disappearing act. Once a poor choice is on a work print, it's almost impossible to musically "fix" it or make it go away; what is - is! Oh, it can be tamed down, deemphasized, or even smoke-screened, but poorly conceived music cannot morph it into becoming the right choice; it's simply too late.

So, what's the answer? The answer is to prevent the problem from arising by entering into the loop early on (by invitation, by force, or even by the back way) before the wrong decision is made. If you can gain the ear of the decision maker before the damage is done you might have a chance at insuring the artistic property and your musical stake in it. Here are a few "gorilla warfare" steps you might consider:

**1. Study the script and make a list of where musical "train wrecks" could occur:**  
e.g. Source music, on-screen performances by crossover artists, production numbers,

location and/or product endorsement music, “recommended” songs by the author as titles, moments, or commentaries.

**2. Learn early on who is making the creative decisions:** e.g.

Is the producer, director, star actor, agent/packager, or record label calling the shots?

**3. Approach them in an informal “out of the office” way if possible.** E.g. At lunch, an awards dinner, basketball 3 on 3, charity event, in the commissary for coffee, on the links, a bar mitzvah, or at a paint-ball war.

**4. Make your case for the right musical choice to these deciders by offering them an alternative Demo of 2 or 3 musical examples for them to listen to on their BMW CD player.**

Very often just having a concrete musical choice in front of them, will assure these deciders that you are capably in control of the musical issues and will dissuade their insecurity forestalling them from taking musical matters into their own hands.

**Caveat:** This creative, common sense, enlightened approach, unfortunately, does not always work. Too often it is pre-empted by greed, ignorance, and ego.

Having said that, however, it certainly is a more proactive way of dealing with an increasing proliferation of bad film making decisions than by compounding the felony, through extraordinary measures, after the damage is done.

You and your art form may be last in line, but you can save the day (and the film) by being the first to anticipate disaster and averting a plethora of musical mishaps before you inherit them.

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Michael Isaacson is a versatile composer, conductor and orchestrator who, aside from his own extensive credits, has assisted Alex North, Elmer Bernstein, John Williams, Walter Scharf, Charles Fox and many others. He now gives private composition and conducting lessons. Dr. Isaacson may be reached at: [eggcreamer@sbcglobal.net](mailto:eggcreamer@sbcglobal.net)