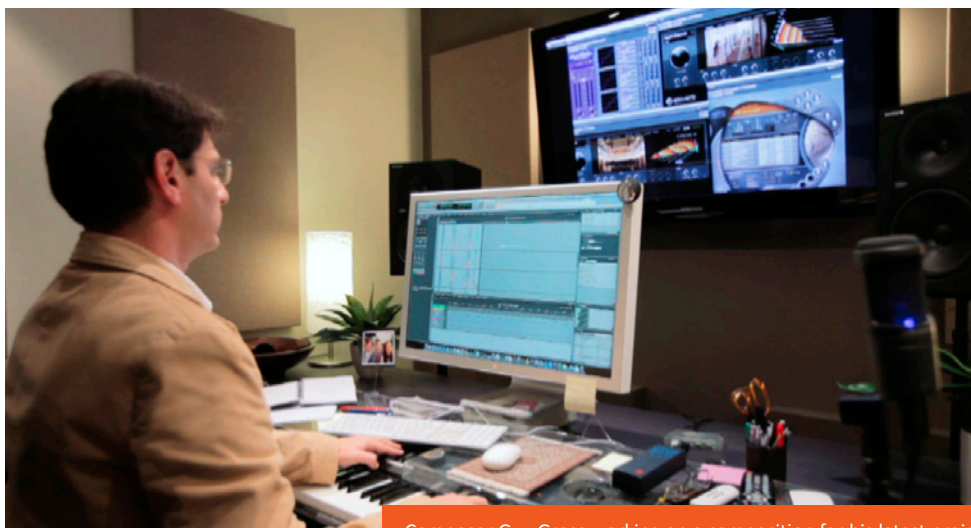


## What is a music composer?



Composer Guy Gross working on a composition for his latest project

Music plays a huge role in movies, shaping the audience's understanding of the story and engaging them with the performances so that they are enthralled by what they are seeing on screen. The composer has the job of creating this music. It could be songs, but is much more often background music or underscore.

Most movies contain a great deal of original music, especially created for the film – that's the job of the composer. A common career path for composers might be: studying at a specialist music high school, further music or film study, composing music for short films, and gradually gaining more opportunities to work on bigger, more demanding projects.

Not all film composers have formal training. Many are self-taught. Some work their way up through the ranks composing for short films made by friends or students. Others have an established career in serious concert composition and are found by a producer or director who feels that their particular kind of music is right for their film's needs.

A feature film might use music from a number of different sources.

Like most jobs in film and TV production, a film composer is a freelance job. That is, you'll be your own boss and be seeking contract work from a wide variety of clients, mostly film producers. It is rarely a salaried position.

In pre-production, or before, the composer reads the script and meets the director to discuss the creative approach to the film, and the specific role of music. In some cases, the composer will wait for the film's picture edit to be finalised or locked before undertaking the bulk of the music work.

If the composed music is required for the shoot, on a dance movie for example the composer starts work prior to the shoot commencing, under great pressure, because at the very least, rough "demo tracks" have to be available for choreography, dance lessons, rehearsals and then the shoot. There is a great deal of technical knowledge required for the correct synchronisation of such sequences. A highly skilled music editor or picture editor is often part of this process.

Many films incorporate both existing music and original music composed specifically for the film by the composer. Many films employ a music supervisor to coordinate the music. If existing music is to be used in the film, the music supervisor, briefed by the producer, director and sometimes the composer, has to source and legally clear the rights to use the required music. The music supervisor's role is complementary to that of the composer, and can often be

creatively significant, helping the director select appropriate songs. If the film is based on a stage musical, such as *The Sapphires* or *Bran Nue Dae*, the composer thinks about additional music to weave in and around the existing material.

If it is necessary to see an actor play an existing or composed piece of music in the film, like Russell Crowe in *Master and Commander*, the composer may be involved in finding a teacher who can transform an actor into a convincing classical violinist in just a few weeks.

Production is usually the quietest time for the composer. If the music has been pre-recorded, some final adjustments may be required. Sometimes the composer will provide a click track that sets the rhythm for performers to dance to, for example, while their lines of dialogue are recorded. Or the producer might request music for work-in-progress cuts for a festival submission, for an advance teaser trailer to go into the cinemas.

Post-production is usually the busiest time for the composer, whether or not existing or previously composed music has been used in the shoot. In fact often, this is the first time a composer is brought onto a project.

During the edit period, the composer may visit the cutting room to discuss a particular sequence with the director and editor but the main work starts when the fine cut is locked.

Once the image is locked “music spotting sessions” are held. The producer, director and editor watch the film with the composer, scene by scene, sometimes shot by shot, to give a comprehensive brief to the composer. This brief ranges from where music should start and stop, to detailed emotional descriptions and intentions the director hopes to achieve. Often a temporary score made up of pre-existing scores would have been used by the editor during the edit to help those watching the film in progress to get an idea of what the final film might sound like. This temp music is often a good indication of the director’s intention.

The music is generally composed electronically with music software called sequencers, such as GarageBand, Logic, Cubase, Digital Performer or Protools. On lower-budget films, the final music is presented only in this electronic format. The quality can be surprisingly good and can often service a film’s needs as effectively as live musicians.

For a major film, the music is usually recorded with live musicians, from a small ensemble to a full symphony orchestra. The recording takes place in a professional studio.

A typical musician call is three hours and usually achieves 10 to 15 minutes of recorded music depending on the complexity of the score. An orchestral contractor can be employed to hire and schedule the required musicians. The music production team may also include a composer’s assistant, studio coordinator, orchestrator, copyists, sound engineers and studio assistants.

Once the composed music is completed, the music editor will cut it together with the image and the existing music and deliver the mixed tracks to the sound mixer for incorporation in the final, full soundtrack of the movie. On lower-budget productions this will all be done by the composer.

The final job of the composer or music supervisor is to create the music cue sheets, which form part of the film’s delivery materials. The music cue sheets document exactly what music is played throughout the film, and what musicians are heard. This very important document allows copyright societies worldwide to distribute royalties to composers and musicians when their musical performances are used in film and television.

Music can often be a significant element in the marketing of a film. Producers and production companies dream of having a hit single from their film shooting up the pop charts just as their film is released. Sadly this is a rarity, although with the reduction in distribution costs there are creative new avenues to use the music to promote the film.

If a soundtrack album is produced, a new master may have to be mixed specifically for this release. These costs are preferably borne by the record company or the production company.

Film music can be a solitary pursuit for lower-budget productions, or an enormous team challenge requiring many creative and dedicated people. Ultimately, music offers an audience a powerful, resonant enhancement of the viewing experience.

[Click here to view interview with music composer Guy Gross](#)

#### Useful resources:

- [Soundworks: Michael Giacchino](#)
- [Soundworks: Bryan Tyler](#)
- [Captain America: The Winter Soldier’s Composer Henry Jackman on Scoring a Superhero](#)

Creative Content Australia is a not-for-profit organisation committed to raising awareness of the significance of copyright, the value of screen content and the impact that downloading and streaming pirated films and TV programs has on the creative industries: [www.creativecontentaustralia.org.au](http://www.creativecontentaustralia.org.au)

Creative Content Australia develops and distributes free online education resources to schools throughout Australia to stimulate classroom discussion about copyright and promote the value of creative content and good digital citizenship online [www.nothingbeatstherealthing.info](http://www.nothingbeatstherealthing.info)

