



FROM LEFT: Bill Bernstein, Johnny Caruso, Joanie Diener, and Todd Kasow

MUSIC EDITORS: A ROUNDTABLE

with BILL BERNSTEIN, JOHNNY CARUSO,
JOANIE DIENER, and TODD KASOW

INTERVIEWED BY MARK SUOZZO AND RON SADOFF

We sat down with four leading music editors to discuss their craft, the business—and their magical art in fostering communication and collaboration between composers and directors. We spoke about how the technological pace of picture editing has transformed the industry and impacted their use of demos, stems, and temp tracks, for both TV and film. Vast databases of “tagged” music from hundreds of scores and sources allow the music editor immediate access to a world of music. Picture editors, too, may begin their work on the film using their own libraries of music—investing the film with a musical signature—or at least a point of departure from which the director/composer/music editor conversation can develop.

Our roundtable revealed aspects of our music editor’s multidimensional perspectives—as a storyteller in facilitating the director’s vision; a musical curator on behalf of the composer; and often an intermediary, answering to both director and composer, in best serving the film.

SCORE: *How do you approach your role as a music editor?*

Bernstein: The first task of the music editor is to make sure the needs of both the composer and the director are being met. The trouble, of course, is that these needs are often contradictory. There is a tricky dynamic at the core of the composer/director relationship: a composer—one who hasn’t become cynical about the process—doesn’t want their composition treated like a commodity. They design the music not only to fulfill a dramatic role but to have artistic value. However, as the music is commissioned for a specific purpose, it is to some extent exactly a commodity. A director will treat the music like sound effects or ADR or any other tool—theirs to cut, change, and re-edit to their liking. They may even express surprise that a composer would object to having their music essentially recomposed on the dubbing stage. Fortunately, the music editor is there to represent the composer at this crucial point. If a director requests a change to a cue it is the editor’s duty to fully understand what they want and try to execute it, while maintaining as much musical integrity and as much of the composer’s intention as possible. If you disagree with the director’s idea, you perform it anyway, and present alternatives. Compromise is the name of the game, and the music editor becomes the mediator.

Kasow: It goes both ways. A composer’s vision to the director and director’s vision to the composer. Usually there needs to be some hand-holding in the beginning. The ultimate goal is to get the flow going both ways because each side may mistrust the other. Both sides can be untrusting of the other, or give in too easily, when there actually might be the need for a little friendly tug of war to get the best product.

As a music editor, developing a dialogue and “vocabulary” where both sides feel comfortable to honestly share their thoughts and ideas is my goal. The film is best served once that process gets going. A by-product of this back and forth is that they are both getting more and more familiar with the music and picture marriage; hence new ideas develop.

SCORE: *Todd—with Carter Burwell and Skip Lievsay, you’ve worked on every Coen brothers film. Can you give us a sense of how that collaboration has endured?*

Kasow: Stepping into the Coens’ workplace, there is a freedom to say anything that comes to mind. Sarcasm abounds and jokes are plentiful. This openness flows to everyone on the job and makes for a wonderfully creative environment. And as the years roll by, we all know each other’s trials and tribulations about what life has brought us. New kids, relationships, life’s milestones. Of the utmost importance is the oatmeal breakfast that takes place before the first day of the final dub:

the early breakfasts in NYC at the Olympic Diner on 49th and 8th, and later years at Shutters in Santa Monica. You must attend... that is, if you want to go to the Meat Dinner after the final dub. We’ve been to most of the famous steakhouses in NY and L.A. It is also the event, if there is a candidate who has completed ten Coen films, that the Golden Porridge Award is given out, a statue of a man holding a victorious bowl of oatmeal above his head. I received their second offering in 2008, the first having gone to Skip Lievsay.

The Coens are not micro managers, but rather let each person in their field of expertise have the freedom to manage whatever might be at hand. I can always call them at a moment’s notice to talk over ideas and creative challenges.

SCORE: *Can you describe some aspects of your role as a creative liaison between director and composer?*

Diener: Often I’ve been in a situation in which a director is expressing what he or she needs or likes/doesn’t like, but it’s generally described in terms of drama and story. I feel I have an aptitude to translate those wishes into musical terms. Or...sometimes a director tries to speak in musical terms without knowing how to, and so I try to translate those ideas into workable musical ideas. Occasionally, composers have actually asked me to temp some cues to demonstrate (if the director isn’t already pointing to my temp).

Being a classically trained musician and singer/songwriter myself, I’ve always been very sensitive to the composer and the integrity of the music. I also love filmmakers, so I actually love being able to thread that needle and help in any way that I can—be it to help the director see why a musical approach works or to help a composer realize the director’s vision without sacrificing quality or intention.

Bernstein: Luckily for me, Thomas Newman is an excellent communicator and has much experience in dealing with personalities. He is usually able to establish a personal relationship with a director, and they see early on how conscientiously he approaches the work.

But it is still critical for me, as the music editor, to establish my own relationship with the director and gain their trust. In cases where a director is reluctant to confront a composer about an issue, I must make sure they know that their interests are understood and addressed. If we have a meeting with

a director who is unversed in musical terminology and procedure, and perhaps self-conscious about it, I will try to be their advocate—asking the composer the questions that I believe they are trying to ask, and letting them know they have an ally in the room. Visits to the editorial rooms, away from the composer’s studio, help foster this relationship. Eventually—when I am the sole advocate of the music on the dub stage—this connection pays off, as I am more likely to be heard when representing the composer’s interests and intentions.

Caruso: In film the music editor’s role is much greater than in TV. That is especially so if you have created the temp. You have established a rapport and relationship with both the picture editor and the director. If you’ve done the temp, you have insight on what works for them in a scene and what doesn’t; you’ve been in a room with them and seen their body language and hopefully have a feel for what they are looking for. What you choose for the temp sometimes ends up helping to decide who is asked to score the film. If the director hears something he really loves that resonates with him, that might do it.

SCORE: *Does your role as the creator of the temp track ever conflict with your role as the composer’s ally?*

Diener: If the composer has been hired by the time I create a temp, I definitely try to consult to get his or her vision for the score. I have to synthesize that with the director’s vision and even my vision. Occasionally there have been conflicts: A long time ago I did a big orchestral temp on a film (a Christmas movie), but it turned out the composer’s deal was basically for a synth score with guitars. The studio was not expecting the big, heartfelt orchestral temp but loved it so much that they renegotiated the composer’s deal to allow for a bigger orchestral score. Another time, a composer I worked with for years called me one day—exasperated—saying he had to rewrite this big set-piece cue for the fourth time because of my “damn” temp cue that worked so well.

Caruso: I think my role as the composer’s ally is the most important part of the job. With that said, there was one project I was working on and the director loved the temp. He tried to license it and couldn’t afford the versions used in the temp. He hired a legendary composer to write the score. He also had me document everything I used in the temp, and then had the temp score recreated. Therefore,

the license he required was for publishing rights only, but *not* for the master rights (should he decide to use the temp). It was a huge session; I carried the redone temp, the composer's score, as well as a lot of source. I was really happy when the director went entirely with the composer's score. Once that tone became established, he started to fall in love with that, and we were able to drop the temp. It served its function as a safety net, and the director was smart enough to see the value of consistency and one voice.

SCORE: *Over the past decade, have you experienced significant changes in the way you approach temp tracks? Are they a result of industry changes and/or technology advances?*

Caruso: Advances in technology—as iTunes began to carry scores and purchasing scores online became easy, the technology has made it easier to find scores and to suggest ones I might not have thought of. It has made it easier to find less well-known scores by composers I like. Some composers have posted their scores on a server that they frequently update, so that staying current with their work is also easier to do. Having cues listed by their names on iTunes makes searching for the appropriate tone easier. If I'm looking for something specific, I can use that as a keyword, and find bunches of options; e.g. type in “walk and talk” in iTunes and you come to a cue in *Bridget Jones's Diary* called “Walk and Talk.”

On a “do-the-work level” being able to add pads and transpose cues has made looking for things in particular keys less important, though I am probably going back farther than ten years when I talk about that, but using plug-ins to create tails or effects to transition out of a cue has made things easier.

Kasow: There's been a move in the last few years to have composers do their work in a timely manner to alleviate the need for temp scores. The bump in this is that many, if not most, picture editors these days rely on music to cut to. Not all picture editors are this way, and in past generations the norm was a picture editor using his or her visual rhythm to cut the picture. I personally found music “fit” much better in this work style. I recently recommended this to a very renowned director, and he really balked at the idea. But a few weeks later he said he had tried it and was amazed how much “fluff [he] was able to remove and better the flow of the picture.” Remember, editing picture to music “boxes in” the composer.

Diener: I have always approached temps as if I was composing the score myself. Thanks to non-destructive digital editing (and the lower cost of large hard drives), my choices for temp have probably expanded (access to more music, and storage of said music). If anything, I probably offer more choices for temp cues than I used to in the old days (I go back to editing on mag) especially if I have started with a blank slate. There are many ways to approach score! Plus, if there are choices, then the director feels like he or she has “chosen” one (psychological warfare!). Sometimes the film editor has thrown music in, and if some of the music is going to stick, I usually have to fix it and smooth out edits. If that is the case, I also try to choose other music that is in the same sonic family. The technology itself has also allowed me to be more creative with temp tracks: It's much easier to facilitate mixing and matching of cues thanks to plug-ins, which allow for pitch shifting, speed varying, etc. We can also add bits of MIDI (when an existing cue might not have everything that's needed).

SCORE: *Let's talk a bit about your work in TV. Has the proliferation of films and television series, now produced by streaming media “studios” like Netflix and Amazon, afforded composers' budgets that include a music editor?*

Kasow: One of the big misconceptions is that composers have to include music editors in their budget. The music editor is part of the post-production budget, not the composer's budget. However, the composer usually has the final say in choosing the music editor.

Diener: Of course for me, anything I've worked on means there was a budget for a music editor. Generally, the music editor does *not* come out of the composer's package, although it's possible that it's a part of what the filmmakers allotted for the music budget. I would say “yes” to your question mostly because there has been a lot more product to work on due to all of the streaming media “studios” and viewing platforms. Mind you, there are probably a lot of micro-budget projects that do not properly budget for music editorial. It usually boils down to the overall budget of the project. It seems that Netflix and Amazon are allowing for music editors in their budgets.

SCORE: *Could you outline some major differences of what you encounter in television, as opposed to film?*

Caruso: In film, especially if you are doing several previews, you're conforming a lot of the cues. Conforms can be brutal because when the scene is recut, sometimes it ends up telling a different story, but everyone is used to that cue. So that's a whole other tightrope to walk, and it's a lot of work usually under a very short deadline. Source is also different in features. The budgets are bigger, and featured songs can really be featured getting 5.1 splits of different elements of the songs and creating a really spacious mix that lets them shine. You're working with the mixer, too, to make certain sections really pop.

I'll mainly speak to series television. In a series, I think one is more a pair of hands and a sounding board and organizer, especially for the first season or two. The first big difference is in TV the temp is usually done by the picture editor or the picture assistant. The composer is developing the library as he scores the show. You get cues with the elements split out into stems. You can try tracking cues early on, but very often it's not until you're three to four episodes deep in the season that you begin to track much.

I found that I would build databases of the cues and label the characters and emotions of the scenes (e.g., “Drive to the Country,” or “Noah Finds Alison”). By doing that, I created a document that I also shared with the assistants so they could reference the characters' themes, and so could I when I was doing the tracking later in the first season and when I started doing more in the later seasons. There are also some composers who have their team and write everything for every episode. No matter how you slice it though, you still have to know the library and be able to find alternates quickly on the stage, as almost inevitably there are some cues that you are asked to change.

Schedules for TV are much shorter than in features. Here you're turning over 35 minutes of music, having addressed changes and dubbing them in ten days to two weeks. In a feature you're on for six months and often longer, and in that time you're looking at about 90 minutes of music being written. When you're tracking cues in TV, you're doing the same thing, but because of the rapid turnaround time you take the splits (or stems) and rearrange the cues, and often that is what gets dubbed.

Diener: I always say that editing for TV is the same as features, except there's less time and less money. I'm not as familiar with the current episodic workflow. I put the same

creative energy into whatever I work on, be it a big film, an indie film, a TV movie/ miniseries or pilot. Actually, pilots can be the craziest of all because so much is riding on the music—and usually it's temp music that has to help sell the show. I did a pilot last year with a wonderful director and producers. For a TV pilot, one usually goes through several different versions: editor's cut, director's cut, producer's cut, studio cut—and finally, for the network. All of this happens in a very small time frame, so it can be more stressful than a similar workflow on a feature (three weeks as opposed to three months). TV final mixes are much shorter than for feature. Since ProTools became standard on the dub stage, extensive editing/re-editing happens throughout the final mix—and doesn't stop until someone says we have to finish and print master! This holds true for TV as well as features.

Caruso: I have worked on a bunch of Netflix and Amazon shows, and most of them have had a budget from a music editor for the entire process. The budgets are a little lower, and sometimes they will try and get you to take a package deal rather than a weekly salary. There have been a couple of shows I know of where I was asked to just build it for the dub and run the dub, but those have been more the exception and usually very low-budget productions.

SCORE: *Could you recount some ways that you have facilitated the acceptance of the composer's approach? And for the director, how do you bridge that transition from the temp to the score?*

Kasow: There was a time when there were very few or no temp scores, because there were no audience previews—or studio committees overseeing the score. I remember our crew flying to Italy to listen to Ennio Morricone in his home playing his themes on the piano, over and over again, until everyone knew them and had figured out where they would go.

Caruso: When the composer is chosen, you present his cues to the director; you mix them in and do a show and tell. You also take the themes being tried out and track the demos in spots where he might not have imagined. You might also take a cue that's been rejected in one spot of the film and find a different scene that it will work under.

Diener: I have mostly tried to use my own powers of verbal persuasion! I have been

in situations where I've had to compare the composer's approach with a different approach (a temp cue I did to satisfy the director) and have used my own words to talk a director out of a different approach or to convince the director that the composer's approach is better and why it is.

Bernstein: Occasionally, when a director can't come to the composer's studio, it falls to the music editor to expose the director to the music—much of which has not been fully fleshed out. This can be a diplomatic task: giving the proper disclaimers while still providing an enthusiastic presentation. If the

director is resistant to the music, then one must be sympathetic (even if they are dead wrong) and carefully explain the options moving forward. The objections must then be relayed to an invariably unhappy composer to whom negative feedback means many additional hours of work, as well as a sense of rejection. One gets to experience the displeasure of both parties! But there is nothing more fulfilling than representing music which enhances a film and brings new understanding to its story and characters. This has been my great fortune more often than not in working with Tom [Newman] over the years.

THE PANEL

BILL BERNSTEIN

Before Bill Bernstein was a music editor, he worked as a computer programmer and helped design “Streamline,” a computer-based digital metronome and streamer system for film scoring, which garnered him an Academy Technical Achievement Award. Working primarily with composer Thomas Newman, Bill has amassed many credits including *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Finding Nemo*, and *Skyfall*. He has won two Grammys and several Golden Reel Awards, and while he enjoys his Pro Tools, he occasionally pines for the days of sprocketed film and synchronizers.

JOHNNY CARUSO

Johnny Caruso began his career as a bassist/composer in NYC. He toured and recorded with artists as diverse as Meatloaf, Rupert Holmes, and Gilda Radner. His love of film brought him to Los Angeles and music editing.

He has worked on over 70 features with such directors as Oliver Stone, John Dahl, Adam Shankman, Jon Avnet, and Tyler Perry, and had the privilege to work with Oscar winning and nominated composers Maurice Jarre, Marco Beltrami, Jan Kaczmarek, and Luis Bacalov. He also has had long working relationships with Marcelo Zarvos, Aaron Zigman, and most recently, Michael Yezerksi.

JOANIE DIENER

After earning her B.M. in Music at UC Berkeley, Joanie continued her graduate studies in musicology at Boston University. Having spent a number of years as a singer/songwriter, her love of film led to her present career as a music editor.

The recipient of thirteen MPSE Golden Reel Award nominations, Joanie has won five times for Music Editing. She also won a Primetime Emmy Award for *Hemingway & Gellhorn*, scored by Javier Navarrete.

Recent films include *Words on Bathroom Walls* (August 2020 release) scored by The Chainsmokers with Andrew Hollander, and *Wander Darkly* (Sundance 2020) scored by Alex Weston.

TODD KASOW has over 120 films to his credit, including a 30-year collaboration with Carter Burwell and the Coen brothers. A master music editor, he is able to act as a creative producer on the scoring stage, as well as the score mix studio. Among the directors he's worked with are Ethan and Joel Coen, Alan J. Pakula, Martin Scorsese, Todd Haynes, Bill Condon, Robert De Niro, and Ted Demme. He's worked with such composers as Carter Burwell, Elliot Goldenthal, Howard Shore, Alexandre Desplat, Nicholas Britell, Terence Blanchard, Burt Bacharach, and Gil Evans. For the past seven years, Todd has also been giving back to the next generation, teaching Music Editing for Motion Pictures at NYU.