

# MEDIA SCORING AND SONIC ARTS

AT BROOKLYN COLLEGE'S FEIRSTEIN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF CINEMA

BY JONATHAN ZALBEN,  
ERIC HACHIKIAN, AND  
JOANNE HARRIS



In the fall of 2015, Brooklyn College's Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema first opened its doors to students. Situated on the Steiner Studios film lot in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, the school is a part of the City University of New York (CUNY), which boasts an enormous network of faculty and students throughout the five boroughs of NYC.

The Navy Yard's website boasts an incredible history. The website says: "Established in 1801, the Brooklyn Navy Yard served as America's premier naval shipbuilding facility for 165 years ... until 1966, when it was decommissioned and then sold to the City of New York." In time, this premier shipbuilding facility became a premier film lot, and within that, the "spirit of innovation" is being reflected in the work of the Feirstein School and its students.

Feirstein is housed in a 68,000-square-foot facility. According to the website ([feirstein.brooklyn.cuny.edu](http://feirstein.brooklyn.cuny.edu)), "The entirely digital production and post-production environment offers state-of-the-art workspaces, studios, stages, and equipment, affording students the opportunity to create in a fully professional setting." Feirstein's facility is housed on the Steiner Studio lot, which opened in 2004 and currently has 30 sound stages along the East River. It is the largest studio complex outside of Hollywood.

## Training in a Creative Ecosystem

The school offers MFA degrees in all aspects of filmmaking, from script writing to development and shooting, as well as finishing and post-production. Unique among film schools, there are two music programs (Media Scoring and Sonic Arts) that round out the curriculum. Media Scoring focuses on music and sound for picture, including composing, music editing, music supervision, and sound design, while Sonic Arts includes curriculum in computer music composition, as well as live performance and recording. Students collaborate across disciplines with filmmakers taking music classes and vice versa.

One current MFA Media Scoring student, Jordan Dykstra, decided to come back to school because, as he put it, “I want a teaching degree and to collaborate with people that are thinking about film all the time.”

Jordan has been finishing a soundtrack release for a new Amazon-distributed film that he co-scored called *Blow the Man Down*. He and his collaborator recorded strings, percussion, flute, and prepared-piano for the cues in the film. Jordan, who already had

a successful performing and scoring career under way before joining the program, said, “The program struck me as something quite unique. It feels very contemporary and has a resources approach and a lot of teaching artists. It’s not very old, so it has a lot of fresh ideas that reflect both 20th- and 21st-century ideas, within its core curriculum.”

Among the teaching artist faculty are Jonathan Zalben (who heads the scoring program) and fellow SCL Steering Committee members Eric Hachikian and JoAnne Harris. All three teach in the program and maintain active careers creating music for picture. Other current Feirstein Media Scoring faculty (many of whom are SCL members as well) include Ed Gerrard, Ron Gozzo, Nathan Halpern, Pat Irwin, D.D. Jackson, Sonny Kompanek, Mary Kouyoumdjian, and Julia Shirar. The program has drawn on other distinguished teaching artists at various points, such as Amy Andersson, who taught the inaugural semester of Conducting for Recording Sessions prior to embarking on a concert and tour of “Women Warriors: The Voices of Change”; and Ron Bochar, Oscar-nominated sound designer and owner at C5, Inc.

Recently, the school welcomed a new director, Richard Gladstein, at the helm. As a film producer, Gladstein was nominated for two Academy Awards—one for *Finding Neverland* and the other for *The Cider House Rules*. He is now leading the school into a new phase, in working to diversify and integrate the school even more into the surrounding community. He brings an energized and inclusive approach to running the school and is working to connect students to the industry within the surrounding film lot and throughout the city. In addition, he has been working with Steiner Studios, the faculty, and the administration to help bring safety and COVID protocols to this unprecedented academic year so that students can continue to more freely create.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Conducting seminar with **AMY ANDERSSON**. L-R: Leah Shaw, unknown, Tamara Kachelmeier, Joshua Loell, Rachel Sarchet-Waller, Marina Havriliak, unknown, Noah Chevan, Greg Pliska, Amy Andersson.

**BELOW:** **ETHEL** masterclass and recording session with student **Adriana Norat**.







## Collaborative Efforts

One Media Scoring student who is continuing to tell stories amid the pandemic is Monica Mou, who directed her first short film this fall, creating a thriller/heist set in an apartment building complex. She shot, edited, color graded, scored, and mixed the film using resources from the school, as well as at her home studio.

Of the experience, Monica commented, “It’s a new thing for me, a new area. Before I selected this course, I never thought I would write a script or shoot a film ... every group had a member from the cinematography track, and she told us a lot of things about how to make the picture more cinematic... Peer feedback is very useful. You also have to look at other people’s work and give them feedback ... I made five cuts for my final project, and each time I made changes, all different students gave me great suggestions.”

Another perennial collaborator, Sonic Arts student Alex Asher, normally has a busy performing and recording schedule with the likes of Beyoncé and Boy George and Culture Club. During the pandemic, he has been reassessing what it means to have a band and be an artist amid lockdowns and closures. He has been busy creating a flurry of new tracks, collaborating remotely with various

artists, as well as recording in the studio using COVID safety protocols. His next steps include marketing a new album with People’s Champs for licensing and placement. He also recorded a new album with Los Cumplesños, with whom he bought battery-powered amps so they could write and rehearse outside—at a safe distance and with proper ventilation. “That was the most COVID-produced band,” Alex said. “Working with pre-existing projects and changing the focus of what our priorities are, we conceptually podded up. I said to myself, here are the people I have the strongest relationships with, so let’s hunker down.”

Peter Scoma, the current Media Scoring track rep, has been flexing his compositional muscles on a number of Feirstein student shorts throughout the semester, mostly remotely, and also taking the time to arrange and orchestrate songs for his band, The Vigilance Committee. His plan is to record the new arrangements and use them in film projects through licensing and scores. His favorite course at Feirstein has been World Cinema to 1960, of which he mentioned that he knew very little about early cinema and the music that was made for those early films, and “found it very inspiring.” In general, the thing he values the most “is the space that’s been given to me to be creative and take risks.

**ABOVE: ABLETON WORKSHOP** with Ben Casey in the recording studios. Standing (L-R): Michael Cassidy, Tamara Kachelmeier, Marina Havriliak, Ben Casey, Jesus Gerdel, Matt Fountain, Joshua Loell, Robert Faroul, Jessica DiMari; Kneeling (L-R): Noah Chevan, Yu-Ting Chen, Rachel Sarchet-Waller.

I have time to ‘mess up’ and grow from trial and error as I try to perfect my process as a media composer ... without Feirstein, I think I would have been blind to the process. It has also pushed me to explore and learn more on my own.”

## A Business Perspective

While many students enter the school from the standpoint of scoring, others are more focused on the business of music for picture. Imani Garner, who just started in the program this past semester, works as the administrator to the EVP of Legal Affairs at Viacom. She is involved in many business and legal aspects of the entertainment business. She is also a talented writer and performer and came to grad school in part to focus on “technical knowledge, creativity, and musical knowledge.” She notes, “I’ve learned that all ideas are worth exploring, and having the technical knowledge makes a great difference in how you approach creation because it

makes the process much more seamless, leaving more time for expressing those ideas while tracking, editing, and mixing... I think as a professional storyteller in this business you aim to create and deliver meaningful work, something that will have an impact on the viewer, something that will inspire, entertain, and if you are lucky, deliver on something that will bear residual positive effect within the industry, which can include everything from creative impact to even job creation. As long as the journey is engaging and you enjoy what you do on the day to day, achieving that in any of those time marks is a blessing."

## Graduates Enter and Embrace the Industry

While the program is relatively new, there have been a few graduates who are making a mark in their respective areas of the industry and in education. Joshua Loell, who was among the first group of graduates in 2019, is now an adjunct professor at Westfield State University teaching composition and film scoring. While at Feirstein he worked with Sonny Kompanek, who he credits with expanding "not just my knowledge about the craft and process of scoring, but also my musicianship." Since school, Josh continues to communicate with his cohort from Feirstein. He commented, "It's been great to have a community of peers to call upon for projects and to continue collaborating with them. I actually just met with some about starting our own library!"

One of those collaborators is Michael Cassedy, who also graduated in 2019. In addition to working with Josh on the new music library venture, he is working as a composer and music director on a hybrid theatrical/film adaptation of *Prometheus Bound*, which will premiere at The Tank in NYC. In addition to working with his fellow cohort, he has also worked with Jonathan Zalben in a variety of roles, such as music editing for Zalben's scores for *On Pointe* on Disney+ and *Axios* on HBO. He also wrote the intro theme to prof. Charles Haine's podcast *The Week in Film Tech* and scored a Feirstein alum's web series *Utilities Not Included*. Of his time at Feirstein, Michael said, "Being in a situation where you can take on challenges but with a support system of faculty and fellow students was really valuable. One huge positive impact on my work process from Feirstein is a big increase in productivity and efficiency. Having the opportunity to work on

so many films at Feirstein, and often multiple projects simultaneously, forced me to become faster with my creative decisions. This has led me to an increased confidence that has seen me through many tight deadlines in my professional work. My first year I scored three of the thesis films. Working with that many directors and editors made me a better composer and formed connections that I still keep up in my professional life."

Another recent graduate, Sonic Arts student Teo Blake, recently produced an album by fellow alum Leah Shaw called *Play Beautifully*—and is also preparing the release of a new solo album. While at Feirstein, both spent countless hours in the three recording studios at school writing, working, collaborating, and also helping other students with their projects. Teo notes, "My time at Feirstein was one of those rare instances where I was having the time of my life and I knew it... I always felt that if I had an idea or something that interested me, I would have help pursuing it. It was a supportive place for critical thinking and curiosity, and that to me is the most important thing within education. I learned many technical skills, and much about the history and the realities of the industry, but it was also a space that fostered creativity and inquisitiveness."

## Music Editing, Music Supervision, and Animation

A truly inquisitive student, Marina Havriliak came to the program primarily to study music supervision and music editing. She has an undergraduate degree in filmmaking, and was already well versed in storytelling, which lends itself naturally to the art of placing music to picture. Within one semester of study at Feirstein, Marina was writing music as well, and in her first year, wrote an arrangement for the string quartet ETHEL, who has visited the school annually to workshop and record with the students. For Marina, this helped spark her exploration of composition, which she continues to do since graduating in 2020. She has also delved head-first into the business end, where she is "building a roster of composer/musicians." She also recently finished music supervising her first feature film, directed by a Feirstein alum.

In addition to narrative and live-action filmmaking, the school has a program in visual effects, so for students like Ming Cheng, this is a perfect opportunity to dive into the world of animation. She is currently

working with a third-year animation student on his thesis film and also collaborating on two other Feirstein student films. Ming mentioned, "Feirstein has had a great impact on my work process. Weekly events and CUNY resources have connected me with great crews, for example, the Netflix series *The Queen's Gambit*. After having a Q&A event with those experienced musicians, my mind was opened to the career possibilities in the film industry and media composition. Moreover, Feirstein has helped me get in touch with alumni who are well established in their careers, and their insights have been invaluable. Finally, as a woman, the Feirstein faculty served as great role models, encouraging me to pursue a career in a male-dominated field, and introducing me to the SCL and the Alliance for Women Film Composers."

Another Brooklyn College alum who valued the professional exposure afforded by the school, Simon Brown, noted, "...seminars were always inspiring. It was amazing to be able to ask experts about their work, hear how the business works, and be affected by their passion. It's incredible how accessible they are—many of the speakers were legends." Simon was also granted a commission by ETHEL after having his work read by the group at the same session as Marina. "I was nominated for their yearly commission and to my surprise, got it." Well, no surprise to anyone who knows Simon. He is a composer with an incredible amount of creativity, drive, and enthusiasm. He helped cross the bridge between Feirstein and the main campus of Brooklyn College, forming a student organization to promote student works in all genres and help students connect across musical disciplines—whether they are writing for concert, stage, or screen.

In addition to composing, Simon noted: "I was thrown into the deep end of sound design. Foley, room tone, horror effects, and music were all a major part of the movie, which has no dialogue. I remember sitting down [in one-on-one lessons] ... and going over it again and again, week after week, until it hit just right. It was like practicing scales on an instrument, starting slowly, getting the technique perfect. I think about that experience every time I work to picture."

While practice makes perfect, it is about the relationships that you build and that is what makes Brooklyn College such a unique place. Simon notes, "I went to grad school to learn the craft of writing music. I came away with some of my closest friends."





LEAH SHAW conducts Brooklyn College Choir students.



End of year concert with the **BROOKLYN COLLEGE ORCHESTRA**. Front Row (L-R): Ron Gozzo, George Rothman, Alyssa Jackson, Tamara Kachelmeier, Chris North, Marina Havriliak, Bettina Sheppard, Jenstar Hacker, Yu-Ting Chen, I-Hsuan Chen; Back Row (L-R): D.D. Jackson, Doug Geers, Ben Davis, Jonathan Zalben, Anthony Roman, Colin Bradford, Yongjia Chen, Yuriy Lehi, Yiding Zhang, Michael Russo, Fawn Segerson, Qiren Lu