

Commissioning Music for Short Film

‘Music tells the parts of the story that nothing else can’- Anna Rice | Composer.

Since the very first silent films, music has been an essential part of the storytelling process. While music serves several functions in a film, among them, it helps to develop narrative, allow the audience the ability to connect emotionally to characters and draw the audience into the world of a film. A great film score will underscore emotion without telegraphing it. An original music score is music composed specifically for your project, it works in sync with on screen action and project narrative and is created from a collaboration between composer and director, with editor and post sound facilitating. Composers for screen are skilled at composing, producing and delivering music to media having specific skills and tools which allow them to work within the full post production team.

Planning Music:

In understanding your project’s musical needs it is important to start to consider them early in the project. What role will music play in your story? Are there any overt mentions to music in your script? Are you including music from source (e.g. from a radio/TV). Will you need to license any existing music rights? Who owns these rights and what are the costs? Do you want to commission a composer to create original music score? Where will you find the right composer and how to engage them?

Music should be considered in the development and budgeting of your project; it is advisable to leave a proportion of budget for music (we recommend around 5-10% for a short) with that percentage going up or down to reflect the role and amount of music likely in the end production. For example, does your story include scenes where there is likely to be live or recorded music playing (night club, wedding, car journeys etc)? Where is this music coming from? Can you budget for it, and how will you do so? A composer can craft music which can also work as source depending on your project’s needs.

Finding and Commissioning A Composer:

Think about what type of music you would like and have a listen to scores in other films. What do you think works and what does not? When you have an idea of the type of music that would work or you would like to explore, it will help you identify and begin a conversation with a composer.

It is recommended that filmmakers research and shortlist composers to reach out to. SCGI has a [directory of professional composers](#) for screen, and [on application SCGI](#) can pass on details of student composers who are associate members. Once you have identified composers who you are interested to talk to, send them an email with a brief outline of your project, timeline for production (even if rough) and music needs. A composer may request a script also to better understand the project.

If they have availability and are interested in taking on the work it is advisable to set up a meeting. This can be done with a shortlist of composers. Communication is key to working collaboratively. An in-person, or Zoom chat with a composer will help you both to get a better feel for the potential working relationship. The earlier a lead time you leave for this the better the outcome. You can request composers to send in samples of their existing work to help better inform your choice. Even if the composer will not start delivering music until post-production, they are happy to be engaged on a project well in advance and it gives them valuable creative time to be considering musical directions.

When you have selected a composer, an email offering the job with details of fee, and rough time projections should be sent to start the engagement process. The composer, or their representative will then reply in agreement or negotiation as to the work and terms.

Work plan:

Once the project has started the composer may start to send through ideas, rough musical sketches for feedback and to hone in on exact theme, tone and direction for music. This is a valuable process towards getting the right music, so it is worth taking time to listen and make notes. Once filming has completed, and a rough edit is in place it is recommended to have a spotting session with the composer, director and editor present to identify places in the narrative for music cues. This will help develop the musical script. Picture lock should then be sent to the composer to work with and they will return with time-coded music cues. Reasonably requested edits and rewrites can happen through to final picture lock.

It is important to communicate and work as a team with your composer to save time and effort on re edits, particularly where budget and fee are not allowing for many work hours.

A composer fee often includes budget for producing music. A composer may perform the score themselves and will be fluent with music samples and the technology required to create score. It is nearly always preferable to have live performers record the final score - either a solo instrument woven into digital instruments or up to and including a full orchestra. Expectations around live performers needs to be discussed early with your composer in order to allow them to budget accordingly, if left too late in the process additional funds will need to be sourced outside of the music budget.

Contract:

A composer contract deals with the terms of commissioning the composer, work arrangements, indemnities and rights. Broken down into main sections the contract should cover fee, delivery times and methods, when and where music can be used, composer credit, who owns the music and how these rights are managed for the project, future use and royalties. The terms of the contract are negotiated based on fee and expectations of both parties and it is a good idea to agree the main terms in a deal memo before work commences.

Composer fee is based on the profile of a composer, the nature of the work and the budget (music and overall) of the project. It is important to have a discussion early with the composer or their agent about costs, expenses and fees. Original music adds value to productions and music budget funds composers to spend time on creating, invest in technology and to hire musicians to perform on score. SCGI stands against the use of any creators without fee in order to gain credits or exposure. This practise undermines the creative marketplace and compromises projects.

Composers for screen are skilled not just at creating music but also storytelling through music so get in touch and make the most out of the creative opportunity of collaborating with one.

For more information and resources on working with a composer please visit www.screencomposersguild.ie or email sarah@screencomposersguild.ie