

CHAPTER 16

Television

The early television years were indispensable.

That was my learning process.

—Jerry Goldsmith'

Music for television is conceptually the same as music for feature films in that it underscores dramatic situations. However, the process of writing music for television, the scope of the music, and the sound of the music itself is often very different. The way television shows are produced leads to a very different use of music. In television, production schedules are tighter, budgets are much smaller, and live ensembles are smaller. There are commercial breaks to consider, and the look and feel of the shows is very different from features. Despite the differences in production, a composer must still write music that is dramatically appropriate and meets the requirements of the production team.

There are several different kinds of television shows and each one has different musical requirements. There are episodic series, TV movies, sports shows, news shows, documentaries, TV magazines, and daytime soap operas; each of these has a different need for music. There are commercials and network logos. Some shows use only synthesizers and samples, some use a live rhythm section, some use a live orchestra. There are those that are hip-hop, light rock, metal, or traditional orchestral in style.

This chapter is concerned with episodic series and TV movies—the shows with dramatic music. An *episodic series* (one that has a new show every week) can be a drama like *E.R.* or *NYPD Blue*; a comedy like *Seinfeld*, or an animated comedy or dramatic series like *The Simpsons* or *Superman*.

The evolution of an episodic television show is similar to that of a film; the idea must be generated, and a producer and a network must be found. A *pilot* is then made, and usually aired in the late spring or summer. The pilot is a single trial episode that gauges the response of the audience. If the pilot is well received, then the network may agree to a whole season, and the show is on its way.

Today there are only a handful of episodic shows that use a live studio orchestra. Because the budgets are smaller, if an orchestra is used, there are many less players than in the orchestra for a feature film. A typical television studio orchestra for a weekly show ranges from 20 to 35 players. (TV movies might use more.) Compare this to the orchestra used for feature films—usually 50 to 100 players or more. This is fitting because the scope of television is smaller in production value, as well as in the sheer size of the screen and audio speakers.

Schedules

When a show is contracted by a network, it is typically for 22 new episodes a year, running from about late September to May. The rest of the year is filled with reruns or alternative programming such as movies or news specials. (When a weekly show is bumped for a special movie or news show, it is said to be “preempted.”) Production of these episodes usually takes place between late July and the end of April, with the period in between, May through July, referred to as “hiatus.” It is during this time that production is “down” and many people take vacations. This is also the time when pilots are often produced.

Once a show starts weekly production and the first episode has been edited, the composer starts to work on the underscore. From this point on, the schedules are very demanding, for the turn-around is fast. Since new episodes are aired every week, the composer has very little time to write the music; every week a new episode rolls down the post-production assembly line and lands at his front door, ready for scoring.

An important production difference between films and television is that in television the director’s role is somewhat diminished. Once the shoot-

ing is completed, the director’s job is often finished. In television, the director is not involved in post-production, so the person that the composer communicates with is usually the producer or assistant producer.

Once receiving the final work-print of the show, the composer may have to spot, compose, and record anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes of music in a matter of days. And this is not a one-shot deal; he could be on a schedule that requires that much music every week, or every other week. If the composer is writing for a live orchestra, then this schedule gets even more compressed, for the music preparation pipeline of orchestrating and copying parts needs some time. If the composer is sequencing and doing the music electronically, then this kind of schedule is a little easier, but still grueling. In fact, some shows have multiple composers who rotate episodes every two or three weeks. When really in a jam, a composer will sometimes call a colleague to ghostwrite some of the music. This is when the main composer gets the screen credit, but others help by writing one or more cues. (Note: ghostwriting also occurs in features.)

Composer Shirley Walker mostly uses live musicians. She describes working under the pressure associated with a weekly series:

The problem with a weekly show is that at a certain point it catches up with you because the schedule is crazy; every week you’re turning out a show. Now, it doesn’t go like that over the whole season because they plan hiatuses and preemptions and things like that. But inevitably you’re going to have a three- or four-week span that hits you several times during the course of the 22 episodes where every week you have to be finishing a show. So you might start out on your first episode, and you’ve got three weeks, and then your second one you might have two weeks, and then pretty soon the weight of that whole thing is a snowball effect that starts really pounding you and pushing you from behind until every week you have to have finish anywhere from 25 to 45 minutes of music.

For *X-Files*, Mark Snow composes all of the music electronically, only occasionally bringing in a live musician to his home studio. He usually

has 20 to 30 minutes of music in every episode. In addition to scoring *X-Files*, he also writes for *Millennium*, which requires another 20 to 30 minutes per week. This enormous amount of music is possible only because the music is done electronically:

For X-Files I get about a week, seven days, but if I have to crunch it, I can do it in three days. If I get the episode on a Monday, I can have it ready for a Friday, which is when the producers come over to the house, listen to the music with the picture, and make their comments.

The way I can do the two shows at once is because they usually, for some lucky reason, come at different times. Let's say they're done in the same week, I'd have three days on one, three days on another; it's doable. I'm used to the shows, I know the sounds and the textures and it's not about starting from scratch and walking around the house for days thinking, coming up with a theme or a palette of sounds. It's pretty easy.

I can go much faster than if I had to record with a TV orchestra. That would absolutely be out of the question. What I'd have to do then is have someone do a takedown, or send MIDI files to the copyists, have them copy the parts, assemble the orchestra, go to the session. It would just be impossible.

Alf Clausen does the music for *The Simpsons* with a live studio orchestra of about 35 players. His typical schedule is like this:

When we're on a week-to-week schedule, what I will normally do is spot an episode on Friday afternoon. The music editor will prepare my timing notes on Saturday and Sunday and then I'll start writing, usually Monday morning if it's a normal episode of 30 cues or less. If it's more than that, I'll sometimes start on Sunday to get a jump on things and then I'll put in probably four long days—Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday—maybe nine in the morning until 11:30 or midnight every day. Then we spot the next week's episode Friday afternoon, and on Friday night starting at seven I'll record the cues that I've composed

during the past week. We usually have anywhere from a three to a three-and-a-half hour recording session to do those 30 cues. Every week is different on The Simpsons, as you know. It really is dependent on whether it's straight underscore type of recording that I have to do or if I have to record vocals and do orchestral sweeteners of songs that I've written and already recorded. So it's never a dull moment.

Main Titles

The beginning part of the show where the opening credits are shown is called the *main title*, a term that is borrowed from feature films. The music for this opening is also called the main title by the music production team—a shortening of the phrase “main title music.” For the television main title, the composer usually writes some kind of theme, or catchy music with a distinct *hook*. (“Hook” is a pop-song term that refers to the one most memorable lyric, melodic phrase, or part of the arrangement.) Actually, the composer of the main title is often different from the composer of the underscore on the weekly episodes. This is true especially if the main title music is a song with lyrics.

For television, main titles are short—typically anywhere from 45 to 90 seconds—as opposed to feature films, where they can be three or four minutes long. In this amount of time, a strong statement about the show must be made that hopefully will be memorable. It is not enough time to develop a musical idea; any ideas presented should be concise and easily accessible to the audience.

Act-In/Act-Out

Every segment of a television show or TV movie, from commercial break to commercial break, is called an *act*. An act can be anywhere from 20 minutes long (the first act of a TV movie) to as short as five or six minutes. Often a composer is required to write a short cue, called an *act-in* or *act-out*, that brings us into the show after a commercial, or takes us out to a commercial. In the early days of TV, these transitions were used all the time. Today they are not automatic; their use depends on the show and the dramatic situation. Sometimes the theme for the

show is used, sometimes new musical material is introduced. An act-in or act-out can be as short as a few seconds, or it can be an extended cue. The important thing is that the act-in or act-out reflect the nature of the show and the story line.

Related to the act-in and act-out are the use of short bridges or transitions. A *bridge* is a music cue, usually of just a few seconds, that connects the story when it moves to another location or forward in time. This usually involves a cut or a dissolve to a new scene. Again, this is more typical of older dramatic shows, but is still used today in many comedies as well as dramas. The slap bass in *Seinfeld* is a typical use of music for both a bridge as well as act-in and act-out.

There are dozens of TV shows every week that use music, while there are fewer theatrical movies. There is a lot of opportunity for composers in television, and many top-notch composers are currently writing for television. There are also many composers now writing exclusively for features who got their start in television, including Jerry Goldsmith, John Williams, and Alan Silvestri. In addition, television can sometimes be more lucrative for composers than feature films because the royalty payments compound when a show is aired and then goes into reruns. If a composer has shows airing on network TV, reruns on local stations and cable, the royalties add up quickly. (See chapter 22 for an in-depth discussion of royalties.)

Some of the most popular shows on television are animated series, such as *The Simpsons*, *Batman*, *Superman*, *Rug Rats*, and *Teletubbies*. Although many of the compositional and scoring techniques are the same for animation as for live action television, there are also many differences. Such considerations are discussed in chapter 18, "Animation."