

## INTERVIEW WITH A MUSIC SUPERVISOR



**K**alonica McQuesten is a San Francisco-based composer and music supervisor who has worked in theatre, film, and the recording industry. In this interview, she discusses her approach and methodology for scoring film. You can ask her your own questions in the Music Supervision discussion forum.

*For what types of projects have you been a music supervisor?*

I cut my teeth as a musician in a collaborative theater group. It was a great way to learn about how music can shape a production, and what issues are faced when you are integrating original music into a piece. My credits as a musician are mostly in live performance -- dance and non-traditional theater -- but I have recently moved into music supervision for independent film. Most recently I was music supervisor for "A Wok in Progress," the third in a trilogy of hour-long documentaries about Vietnamese culture and food, which were produced for PBS. It had its premiere screening at the Asian American Film Festival this last spring in San Francisco and will be broadcast on PBS affiliates nationally over the next year. The directors, Paul Kwan and Arnold Iger, came to film by way of fine art (performance and illustration) so there are some very whimsical and experimental qualities in their work, which is one reason I love working with them.

Ten years ago I was making live music for Paul and Arnold's multi-media performances in San Francisco. One of the theater pieces we worked on was the basis for their first documentary. It has been interesting to move from music for live theater into music for film and see what principles still apply.

*How did you work with them during this project?*

We spent several initial meetings brainstorming about the themes we wanted to explore in the film, and I started making connections to how they might be expressed in music-- what kind of instrumentation, what moods, what "flavors" I should go look for.

In the past, I've worked on projects where all the music was original composition. On this project I made some original music, but was primarily acting as a music supervisor. The roles are altogether different with different limitations and freedoms, but in both cases it ultimately comes down to presenting the directors with music that you think is appropriate, that either will or won't be included in the final cut.



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"Wok" was shot entirely on DV. They had a good 80 hours of footage to whittle down, and so I didn't really get a sense of exactly how that hour would be shaped until we were well on our way into the selection of the music. So, through the first two-thirds of the music selection process I wasn't seeing much more than an evolving set of storyboards, a few clips of footage and the occasional sequence.

*So, uh...do you just start digging through records and looking for things? Does the director usually specify style or anything?*

After our brainstorming sessions, Arnold and I had agreed on what the parameters for the music could be. We had decided that we weren't limited to a single ethnic line. I could go beyond Vietnamese musical traditions and pull from a much broader palette of ethnic music. "Wok" was dealing with immigrant Asian culture and, based on our original brainstorms, I went and found some terrific klezmer music...I should probably explain that.

*Please.*

The film was about how Paul Kwan, as a Vietnamese émigré to America, turns to traditional foods to sustain his sense of cultural identity. In previous productions, I had made music that had Southeast Asian instruments, rhythms and scales, but we wanted to open things up with "Wok." Paul and Arnold now wanted to speak about immigrant culture on a more universal level. We decided that mixing up our musical cultural references was a good mirror for how cultures mix and assimilate in America. So there's a scene in "Wok" of a Chinese wedding party and there's the klezmer dance tune underneath it all. I like that we got to make a playful musical connection there.

*So your musical choices were re-stating the director's thematic intent?*

Yes. Or underscoring it.

*So typically you simply present the director with a selection of music that you think is appropriate and you let them decide what to use?*

Yes. And how to use it. There is a lot of give and take with these directors. They often look to the music for inspiration for pacing and transitions from scene to scene and will often edit a scene directly to the music, right down to the beats and accents. Our next project will be a feature, so I wonder if we'll be able to work the same way when we have to pace to an existing script.



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In my experience, unless I've been intimately involved at the production level, the director is the one who knows what is going to work best where, and for how long.

*Do directors ever "direct" you? That is, do they ever say things like "in this scene I'm trying to convey blah blah blah" and then leave you to your own devices to decide what music is appropriate? Or do they just say something like "I want a rock song here, I want a jazz song there, etc.?"*

Although it is part of my job to go out and get the element that the director wants, I prefer it when I'm told what the desired effect is--when I'm given leeway to be creative. I think when it works that way I'm able to lend my talents more fully. The directors get the advantage of experiencing an unexpected solution too, which can break up predictability in their production.

*What issues -- freedoms and limitations -- do you encounter as a composer?*

Well, as a composer, for both film and live performance, I have been lucky to be really integrated into the creative process the whole way along on most of my projects. When you're collaborating on that level, the ideas you have for music get to be on the same table with the essential story ideas right from the beginning. Things evolve at the same time and music isn't tacked on at the end. So that's my model for being a composer.

For "Wok in Progress", the music has emerged in a couple different ways. Sometimes my music-making partner and I just start generating stuff we want to make (usually longer atmospheric or textural pieces), and then the directors pick and choose what they like from those finished recordings; and sometimes we're "commissioned" to write something for an already-edited scene.

Being a composer is more fun, but a lot more work, and working on small-budget films, you have to just want to be involved and not worried about your hourly rate. Also, when you work "on spec" like that, you end up seeing a lot of your music on the cutting room floor.

*How does that work differ from being a music supervisor?*

As a music supervisor I'm free to go hunting for music by musicians who can do something I could never do, who have an entirely different palette of sounds. But, with the budget I'm working within, I don't have the option of getting music made to order unless I do it myself.

Do you worry at all about licensing, or do you go ahead and pick the music you want and then decide later if you can actually afford it?

Being a grant-driven project, "Wok" had an extremely low-budget. So yes, I worried about licensing fees. My ability to provide good music to Paul





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and Arnold was very dependent on having the good will of recording artists I personally knew. I tried to cultivate a sense of shared benefit from being involved in the project and did everything I could to keep the process of music licensing as painless as possible for everybody. I hope the artists and labels I worked with ultimately felt that they got some good exposure and some extra money that they hadn't counted on that quarter.

*What options do lower-budget filmmakers have when licensing music? They probably can't afford the latest Madonna track. What if they want something like that?*

If you actually want to use that Madonna track, you're probably out of luck unless you have massic connections! But if you're anywhere that has an urban independent music scene, you're bound to be able to find some combination of artists that could pull off a good sound-alike song. Who knows, maybe one of your musician friends has already done it, and maybe it's better than Madonna.

If you know what you want, just start asking for it. Go explore what the musicians in your town are doing, establish relationships with people working at independent labels. If you can present your project as worthy, musicians and labels will usually be thrilled to start negotiations.

*If someone finds a track on a commercial recording that they want to use, what are the steps in tracking down permission?*

Well, you have to secure the rights to both the recording of the song and any publishing rights attached to the song. So you want to negotiate "synchronization licenses" for the songs you want to use. This is the type of license you need to sync an image with a particular recorded piece of music.

If what you want is on a major lable, they usually have a whole department that deals with licensing. You just have to contact them and tell them what you're after.

Smaller, independent labels often hold all the rights -- publishing and recording -- for a piece and will be accustomed to administering requests for rights. In other words, they'll be able to point you to the right person.

If you're on a really low budget, you'll probably only be able to afford smaller labels. Don't forget that you have things to offer them besides cash. In addition to getting their names in the credits, people will hear their music and that's good exposure.

## **KALONICA MCQUESTEN - CREDITS**

### **CD'S AND RECORDS**

*Quasi Objects*, 1998 - Matmos - Performer, Sound Generator

*Armadillum Vulgare*, 1997 - compilation of work by Iao Core - Collagist and Singer

*Event Horizon, Tau*, 1997 - compilation CD - "Bedroom Eyes," by Plush Monkey - Wrote and Sang

*Nobody Knew the Time*, 1995 - Beasts of Paradise - "Safe Love" - Wrote and Sang

*Moods for Misty Evenings*, 1988 - compilation EP - "Difficult Face," by Elbows Akimbo - Singer and Co-Writer

### **FILM AND VIDEO**

Persona Grata

*A Wok in Progress*, 2000 - Original Music and Music Supervision

*Anatomy of a Springroll*, 1991 - Original Music

Betsy Weiss

Short Film - "With Her Mother's Eyes," 1991- Original Music, Performer

Lynn Hershmann-Leeson

Feature Film: *Virtual Love*, 1988 - Title Song, "Virtual Love" - Wrote and Sang

### **LIVE PERFORMANCE**

Anah-K

Dance Performance: *Kalevala*, 1993 - Musical Collaborator, Performer

Lizz Roman and Dancers

Dance Performance: *In Her Dreams*, 1998 - Recorded Music



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Jack Dubowsky / Sno Pea Ensemble

Opera: Slave, 1997 - Performer

Lynn Hershman-Leeson

Performance: Endangered Species, 1987 - Musical Collaborator, Performer

Persona Grata

Equity, 1987

Anatomy of a Springroll, 1991

George Coates Performance Works

Architecture of Catastrophic Change, 1990

Elbows Akimbo

Tempest - Musical Collaborator, Performer

O Flame of Living Love - Performer

Carne Vale - Music Director, Performer

*For more information, contact Kalonica McQuesten at [kalonica@yahoo.com](mailto:kalonica@yahoo.com)*

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