

Music Forum 8/5 June 2002

The artistic, professional and personal demands placed on the film and television composer are seen in two lights in this edition of the screen composition series. We explore an important business aspect of film and television music, being the administration of performing rights for broadcast performances.

Michelle O'Donnell, the Film and Television Writer Services Manager from APRA, shares her observations on the current state of the Screen Music Industry in Australia, while offering guidance on this issue of performing rights. A perspective on the artistic and professional challenges of the individual composer are then shared by Yantra de Vilder. Her insights to an "On the Couch" event with screen and concert composer Michael Nyman are included, an event hosted by the Australian Guild of Screen Composers earlier this year. -- Leah Curtis

Michelle O'Donnell

Eighteen months ago APRA (The Australasian Performing Right Association) set up a separate department dedicated to assisting the growing number of composers who write specifically for film and/or television. The complex copyright issues and royalty streams experienced by this genre of composers are very different from those of our classical, jazz, pop and country writer members.

As more of our composers move into this field, education as well as maximizing their royalty income are now priorities.

In early April we held the first of a series of joint workshops with the AGSC (Australian Guild of Screen

Composers) convincing two of APRA's most successful film/TV composers David Hirschfelder (Shine, Sliding Doors, Elizabeth) and Burkhard Dallwitz (Channel 7 Olympics, Truman Show) to

speak and Martin Armiger (Cody, Thank God He Met Lizzie, Police Rescue) to chair the evening. It was a full house with an

audience ranging from experienced composers to those just starting out in documentaries. Both composers

spoke at length about their experiences including how they got into the business, their composing techniques and describing what it was like working on the Hollywood blockbuster with an A list director. Their behind the scenes stories ranged from extremely funny to artistically frustrating, which many of the

composers who attended the seminar found strangely reassuring -- even at their level you still have issues

and sometimes limited creative input.

Australian composers are now enjoying increased international success but that seems to be coming at a

price. The good old days of composers retaining 100% of the income generated by the broadcast and public

performance royalties are long gone, the American system of the producers and/or television stations

requesting 50% of that income stream is now commonplace and in most cases if the composer refuses

to grant this income split he/she will not get the job. Budgets for music also appear to be shrinking;

for example, one of our composers was commissioned to write a new ID theme for a television station and was paid exactly half of what he had been paid five years ago when he wrote the original.

Composers new to this field need to be wary and always get legal advice before signing any contract. Legal

advice doesn't have to be expensive. Initial advice can be obtained from organisations such as the Australian Copyright Council (ACC) ( [www.copyright.org.au](http://www.copyright.org.au) ) or the Arts Law Centre of Australia ( [www.artslaw.com.au](http://www.artslaw.com.au) ) for the cost of a phone call. APRA cannot give you legal advice but we are

more than happy to have a quick look at any contract to at least ensure you are not signing away everything

including "your first born". Quite a few of our new APRA members have been seduced by the opportunity of composing music for nothing or a pathetically small fee with the promise of huge backend royalties

generated from the international broadcasts (usually a documentary or short film). It doesn't happen;

documentaries and short films go straight to cable television or the film festival circuit where the royalties are negligible.

At the other end of the scale, broadcasts on free to air television can provide substantial royalties both

locally and overseas. Many of our local composers are now enjoying the fruits of their labours twice. The

first round of royalties is generated by Australian and New Zealand broadcasts followed by a second round

from successful international broadcasts. Television series such as Home and Away, Neighbours, Bananas in Pyjamas, Secret Life of Us and Heartbreak High, for example, are hugely successful in Europe and Canada. Even the original series of Skippy is still broadcast in Italy and generating royalties for the composer who is now in his eighties and enjoying a well earned retirement.

Michelle O'Donnell is the Film and TV Writer Services Manager for the Australasian Performing Right Association (APRA)