

INTRODUCTION

Of the correspondence I received following volumes I and II being published simultaneously last year, which thankfully was entirely positive, one reoccurring theme was the benefit composers felt they had gained from the attempt to debunk some of the myths and perceptions surrounding how we write or ‘create’ music. I had worried that my attempt to uncover and rationalise the skill of composing and open it up to perhaps a more enlightened and less obsessive and reverential perspective might itself be perceived as being demeaning to ‘the great composers’. Far from it; what I wanted was simply to analyse how people write music. I wanted to analyse the process, the skill, the talent, the cleverness, the expertise and discuss it without being preoccupied by discussing *people* rather than the music they write. I didn’t want to be side-tracked into debating *art* or *inspiration* and feel compelled to discuss things like *genius*. Genius is a word people sometimes use, either to try and articulate their own respect and worship for a particular artist or composer, or sometimes because they do not understand the process by which people produce ‘great’ music, in which case *genius* and *art* are sometimes the only words which cover it. Genius, of course, means nothing; it’s an opinion, not a fact. It’s judgment, not a reality. It is an individual’s point of view, not an accurate description; it’s used when ‘great’ isn’t enough. It has more gravity than ‘brilliant’, sounds more authoritative than ‘awesome’ and it has more historical pedigree than, say, ‘fantastic’. But it is still meaningless; worse still, it sometimes prevents a more reasoned and rational understanding of how music is created.

If we are to make proper sense of what music is and draw reasoned conclusions we need more than abstract words; if we ask the right questions music will tell us the mysteries of its success. But if we’re looking for secrets we may have a long wait because sometimes there *are* no secrets; no thunderbolts of lightning, no grand unveilings and no fabulous surprises. There is only music and the way we all use and manipulate the structures, harmonies, textures and rhythms it offers us. We rearrange what is there to make something which can be considered, at least legally, ‘new’ and therefore ‘ours’. The trouble is that because of the way we are sometimes taught in schools and by the mass media not to learn but to revere ‘great art’ and worship at the altar of the great composers, we tend to personalise the concept of composing to the extent where we assume every crotchet and every chord and every texture that breathes life into music is literally the product of one person’s greatness. In reality we mix the existing colours of texture to create the sound we want and we plunder existing harmonies and mix, match, alter, subvert and place them in an order which suits our piece. We are arrangers; we *place* things, horizontally, vertically, texturally and rhythmically. Just as an artist cannot claim to have discovered specific colours, composers cannot claim to have invented the chords they use. What they ‘invent’ is the sequence, but this is not an invention; merely a decision.

Music and architecture

People see architecture as a technical skill more than an art; this is because they understand the process, to a degree. We refer to architects conceiving and designing buildings. We do not literally imagine they create the things from thin air. We know the bricks are there already, which is why we see their ability as ‘skill’ rather than ‘creativity’. We know there are only so many ways of building with bricks so we accept that this is more a skill and less of an act of creative individuality. It is the *design* we appreciate, but we tend not to go ‘over the top’ with praise because we realise, if one is being honest, that buildings are functional and in terms of structure, one is pretty much like another; this is something we would never say about music although in fact in terms of structure this sentiment applies to music too, to a point. Also, we would never imagine authors literally created words themselves; they create the order of delivery and therefore, to a degree, they are responsible for the specific meaning and context. We have slightly more reverence for authors because for the most part, the vast majority of people aren’t able to write books themselves (although, as many authors have attested to, what most people who *think* they can’t write books actually lack, is an eye for organisation, design, method, structure, assembly, arrangement, placement etc. The *idea* or the *concept* is only a small part of the plan). Most people don’t write books not because they lack *the great idea* but because they lack the skill to design it, to build it, to pull it all together and to finish it.

But still, most people understand the individual words in a book and the implied meaning they create because they see, hear and interpret the meaning through the words. But because most people can’t *see* music and can’t listen with heightened musical knowledge, they often don’t *understand* it to a great degree. They are emotionally moved and manipulated by something they fundamentally do not understand on a deep level. I’m not saying people who don’t read music can’t understand it, I’m simply saying that they can’t visualise it so they are dependent on their aural cognition and are not aided by the liberating ability to see, to decipher, to untangle, to decode; to interpret and to see new ideas and possibilities.

Some, particularly the refusenik composers who can't visualise their own music and therefore develop a mantra to defend this lack of ability, sometimes interpret this as blissful ignorance, but it is not; ignorance is rarely bliss. Because most listeners don't possess the ability to visualise the music they hear, into the vacuum created by this lack of context often come respect, reverence and veneration for the people who create music. With words or pictures people can see and realise how they're affected emotionally, but with music any 'understanding' is purely aural.

People don't usually deeply understand the structure of music and cannot appreciate it or see it or even hear it outside the context of the finished article. Artists don't release partial recordings or stems, so all people hear is the wonderful finished article. Because of this sometimes people talk of composers 'creating' music, of them creating something quite literally and utterly new, when usually all that is brand new is the specific complexion, the precise order of the notes and chords (and these are often very similar) and the specific complexion of the sound. Once again, as I have gone to great lengths to say before, none of this means composers aren't hugely talented people who do things very few others do. All I try to do is place skills in a realistic context. One of the fundamental aims of the last two books was to try and get rid of some of the non-essential context that pervades music discourse. In previous volumes we spoke of the 'art' of composing (whatever that might be) being subject to myth and misunderstanding. The fact that we call it an *art* and not a craft or a skill is itself revealing because, as we found out in volumes I and II and will discuss again in this volume, music composition is a *creative skill*. If we call it what it *is* - a skill - then we can rationalise it easier. What composers make may be referred to by others as art, depending on their opinion, but since art is a perception, not a reality, it is best if we talk about composing music as a skill.

History and teaching

The way history frames 'music creation' as being almost godly does not help people understand it in any meaningful way; it simply makes them revere it. Many teachers are no better, carefully and studiously keeping the myth of genius alive and using it as the only explanation for 'great' music and a stick with which to keep students 'in their place'. From a purely personal perspective, as a lecturer, I have gone out of my way to remove these empirical contexts from the lecture theatre. As a result students have learned on a level playing field without some of the more reverential and flimsy context that often surrounds music. This does not mean that learning music and learning how to become a film composer is easy. It is fantastically hard to grasp and achieve, but to teach it as a skill makes it more achievable. Ultimately, film music is written by people like *you*. Several students I taught recently are doing incredibly well in the industry, some of whom are now working in London and Hollywood as film composers. Some current students are just as able and are completely ready for the industry. They all work incredibly hard at something that is very difficult to understand and achieve, but along the journey they always had the potential to do it and didn't ever get bogged down with undue reverence toward famous composers, over and above the obvious acknowledgement, where it is justified, of great skill, great imagination, great creative judgement and an obsessive and fanatical work ethic.

Many of the pedagogical structures in place for 'teaching' music are inherently suspect because, as I have stated, they sometimes teach us to revere, not to learn. They teach us about respecting the work of others and not about reaching inside ourselves to discover the composer within. Worst of all, at many levels of education they teach us that composing music must, at all costs, always be 'fun'. Therefore learning how to compose must be entertaining. The acquisition of compositional skill is linked to 'having a good time', and 'feeling fulfilled', as if creative people are permanently happy and fulfilled people. If we examine the work and the craft of the 'great' composers, whether we're talking about hundreds of years ago or more recently, 'fun' is not always a word that comes to the forefront of one's mind. Composers are sometimes anxious, worried, emotional people. Because so few people write music, they are often solitary, introverted private people. By convincing young teenage minds that music must be 'fun' all the time, and by trying to airbrush from education the need for music theory, we are trying to make music seem easier than it is. I realise that educators are trying to make music 'accessible for all' but the subtext of this dumbing down is clear: making music must be fun. This attitude essentially runs the risk of deskilling composers and relegating the writing of music to an amateur level. This is why so many people think of music as a purely recreational activity and not something people might do professionally. It is hard to think that in the first day of training to become a Pilot one would be told that the most important thing was to have fun. Presumably the most important thing is to fly the plane.

Music has been made secretive and enigmatic over the past few hundred years by philosophers, poets, academics and other thinkers. Some came heartbreakingly close to the truth by thinking of music, quite rightly, as a language, but then sprinkled it with stardust by referring to it as a language 'removed from any reference to the real world'.

If only they'd composed music they might have realised that music wasn't quite as unknowable as they'd presumed. Nietzsche believed it to be a product of 'primordial intuitive knowledge'. Such descriptions and plaudits are gifted to composers like confetti because they are a substitute for knowledge and understanding about the actual process of how music is made. If there is something which appears to be wonderful and appears to defy all known terms of reference when attempting to rationalise and describe it, into this vacuum come supposition, presumption and hypothesis; essentially *best guess*. Wendell Phillips, a prominent American abolitionist and advocate for Native Americans, said in a speech at Harvard in 1881: "Education is not the chips of arithmetic and grammar,—nouns, verbs, and the multiplication table; neither is it last year's almanac of dates or series of lies agreed upon, which we so often mistake for history." In doing so he paraphrased Napoleon, who allegedly came up with the line that, 'history is a lie that we all agree to'. Either way this is an important point; often the teaching of history (in our case the teaching of the lives of the great artists, writers and composers) is riddled with supposition and innuendo, which can become error, fabrication and inaccuracy. The desire to make events or historical figures more exciting or relevant than they actually were is a well-known Achilles heel of some history books.

How music is written

In the first book in this series we spoke of the myth of 'linear creation'. The idea that 'great' music is written from left to right, from beginning to end, fuels the notion of genius. But as we discussed, most composers, including the 'greats', did not write in this way. They would write in sections; often they would compose a melody first or sometimes a bass line first. Then they would fill in the harmony later. Or they might simply write a sequence of chords first. This may ring a bell because it's probably, to an extent, the way many of us write. Or you may have your own particular hybrid system which works best for you. Sometimes the great composers would swap sections around and end up finishing the ending first and the beginning last. The walls of many composers' homes were full of half-finished ideas, just as ours are. Only a small number would ever make the cut. And then they snap it together and because we listen to it from left to right, in a given length of time, we make the fatal assumption of presuming that this is how it was all created. Music is hardly ever created in this way and our belief in these notions is an example of our desire to idolise, to revere. This is not to denigrate the great composers; after all, it is humbling and sobering to know that Mozart wrote the overture to *Don Giovanni* on the morning of the night of the gig – or I should say the Opera's premier. One has to be honest and say that this was amazing. But when analysed, it only qualifies as utterly mind-boggling if you assume that everything he did *that* morning was the result of *then*; that is was all thought up in that brief period of time. If ever an act was the result of profound skill and judgement learned over a long period - rather than something that happened in a flash of lightning - *that* event surely was.

In praise of stress

I can remember when I first started doing TV that some producers would demand tight turnarounds. Sometimes I would get a day or two. One of the worst times was when the TV station was responding to the death of Princess Diana and called me saying they needed 'eight minutes of mournful music, quick'. I asked how long I had and they responded that the courier motorbike (which used to appear from time to time to get DATs from me) had just set off. It took him half an hour to get to my flat. At 6 I began, at 6.30 the bike arrived, at 8 I finished the mix-down and handed it over and at 11am I listened to it on the television. The pressure was immense but strangely intoxicating. Also it was rewarding because you have the satisfaction of knowing that, in all probability, nothing else you ever do in your life will ever be that strange. One time a colleague arrived at the London theatre where I worked as musical director at 10pm, announcing that he was due in a town thirty miles away the following morning at 9am where he was working as musical director for a Christmas show. He'd just found out that the deal he signed included having all the music arranged for the show – something he hadn't done before and a skill he didn't have. So we went back to Camden, listened to the songs they wanted and I sat and arranged the stuff (by hand – this was the late 1980s). At 7a.m. I drove him to Caledonian Road tube station where he, his equipment and the music, left. He arrived on time and the people who'd employed him never knew. This was stressful but it wasn't impossible. And what I did in the flat that night wasn't the result of *then*, it was the result of years of being involved with tight deadlines which makes speed as important as ability. Another time in Europe I did a show where twenty nations were participating in an entertainment version of the Olympics. Artists would perform over a two week period to live audiences, who would vote for their favourite entertainer. At the end someone would come first, second and third. A day before the end, the organiser came to me and said they'd forgotten ask me to write out every national anthem. I said they didn't need all of them; all they needed to do was tell me who'd come first, second and third. They needed only three, which would cost them significantly less money and me less time.

They said the winner was a secret they couldn't reveal, so the night before the final gig I spent researching, collating and faxing publishers all over the world for the dots, which I then had to score out for a 15-piece band. Another time I sat on the top floor of a Broadway theatre in New York frantically rescoring a musical due to major changes that had taken place. Naturally the arrangers had been given a laughably short amount of time. We had what amounted to *that day* to sort things before the rehearsal at 5pm and the show at 8pm. I can remember a security guard coming to the door to remonstrate with me about the fact that I was smoking in a non-smoking building. I told him that basically if I didn't smoke they wouldn't open.

How do we 'make stuff up'?

Obviously these kinds of experiences, of which there were many, were abnormal even within the mad context of the music industry. I am not for a moment comparing myself to 'great' composers *at all*, but there is no way this can be done unless you plunder your existing knowledge, which sits within you, waiting to be converted into something tangible. The idea that you literally 'make stuff up on the spot' is not accurate, whether we're talking about composing, arranging or indeed most things creative. We may *think* we do, but we don't. You may produce the goods on the spot but the knowledge, information and 'raw data' of harmonic, orchestration, production and structural knowledge required to produce this plays a much bigger role, intellectually and practically, than people imagine.

Content, structure and form

People sometimes imagine that the 'art of composition' is somehow separated from the much more mundane possession of knowledge of structure that enables 'creation' to happen in the first place. This isn't entirely true. Composition is the result of an internal collaboration between different parts of your ability, different parts of your knowledge and different parts of your memory, which distil to create music. The product may be *now* but the constituent parts are accessed from a combination of intellect, memory and the skill it takes to access it them. The 'now' element is tied up in how we specifically interpret our existing knowledge; but this is the culmination of a process, not the process itself. To return once again to genuinely great composers; Mozart, like all great composers, had his head permanently filled with an almost endless and permanently percolating knowledge of structure and harmony and orchestration and placement and architecture. So for someone like that, channelling his immense imagination and sculpturing it into something that could be played in a few hours was just as much about how focussed he was, how dedicated, how resolute, how tenacious, obsessive and driven he was.

One of the reasons people revere the art of composition is because they wrongly think it's all about 'content' – i.e. the stuff the composer *thinks up*. They think 'form' is a convenient ready-made shell into which the composer pours his or her uniqueness. They imagine that form is a receptacle. The belief then is that form is less important than whatever it contains. This is misleading; form has no inside and outside. Form is just as much a part of what makes music sound unique or 'great' as the 'content' it accompanies. Form guides content. And yet form is not something composers' necessarily invent or create. Form is a template, a pattern, an approach or methodology. When listeners react to the 'exciting bits' in music or the sections that really engage them they could just as easily be responding to something which is more form than content. If, as a listener, you react to the way an inversion really gives the piece a sense of lift, a sense of purpose and an element of drama, you're responding to something the composer decided to make use of, not something the composer can be said to have *created*. Even the 'stuff composers think up' is itself heavily guided by the need and desire and propensity to follow existing structures and forms. It's highly unlikely and very rare that a composer can be said to have thought up an entirely new chord sequence. And even if they had, they didn't invent the chords so they can't be responsible for the fact that it works; they are responsible for *realising* it works, not for *making* it work.

The difference between the reality of music and the written and taught history of it

It's important to realise that, just like today, only a fraction of great composers would have 'made it' into mainstream recognition. Most classical music history books focus inevitably on one or more of a group of maybe thirty or forty great composers; this gives the history of music a sense of structure, evolution, heritage and tradition. It gives it a good narrative; it makes it into a 'thing'. It gives students a set of names to focus on as if that's all there ever was. But we sometimes forget that there were many, many others. Today we readily accept that being famous doesn't necessarily always equate to being the best; only to being successful.

But we accept without question the carefully choreographed narrative of music history which delivers a few composers whose ability is now regarded as almost magical and beyond belief. But of course it wasn't beyond belief because it *happened*. These characters were people, not gods. If we had been around when Mozart was, we might have realised that Mozart wasn't writing for prosperity. Neither was Bach. They wrote for the moment, the concert; the performance – the gig. Sometimes when we study music we impose on it a level of importance that it sometimes did not have at the time. This doesn't make it any less special and doesn't mean that Mozart and Beethoven weren't revered during their lives, but it does mean that there is a fundamental difference between the reality of music and the history of it. Few books offer ways of genuinely analysing the music for the benefit of new composers; they mainly analyse to revere, to behold, to amaze. The same things happen now; when I wrote the first two volumes and decided to publish online for free I made the book available on my own website. They have so far been thirty thousand downloads. But one or two groups set up to discuss film composers were incredibly snooty and asked me not to post links. When I enquired why they said that a book that proposed to explain how film music was written wasn't suitable. Instead they post pictures of composers on their tenth birthday or composers smiling at cameras during recording sessions or pictures of composers smiling at concerts or climbing mountains or eating Sushi. This is interesting to some but it doesn't explain anything or enlighten new composers.

In order to look at the issue of why people are happy to simply 'revere' and are sometimes happier without context, we need to look at the evolution of classical music and in some ways also to something much closer to home – the 20th century record industry. They were the undisputed gatekeepers; the prism through which all recorded music was disseminated to its audience – us. And in carefully managing the process through which we received music they were able to frame our understanding of it. If we ask ourselves, what is 'classical music' many people would assume the term refers to most orchestral music before the 20th Century. But it isn't necessarily a particular style or a particular genre. It isn't any of those things; it is a tradition; an *idea* that music should be played and received reverentially. So essentially it is a dogma; a type of guidance on how to listen and appreciate and revere. But classical music wasn't always regarded by its original consumers as being 'classical' at all. It was regarded as music they responded to straight away. So in effect it could be argued that 'classical music' was a term invented by the 'early music industry'.

The 19th Century and the 'sacrilisation' of music

The sacrilisation of music is where it is plucked out of its recreational and representational context and elevated to something which should be worshipped for 'itself'. This is really where the idea of the 'Classical Canon' developed. Until then most music was regarded as music to be played once or twice and then forgotten. As I said earlier a lot of Mozart's music was written in that way; he wasn't writing for posterity. Posterity came afterwards; it was *19th Century music biz*.

Shhh

In the 19th Century silence became important. People were told to be quiet; to listen. There is a perception that classical concerts have always been that way; always attended by men in suits and women in gowns who all sat in silence. Because this is how some people do it now, it is presumed that the music has always benefitted from this unbridled reverence. But, again, this is the 19th Century music industry at work. At the time of many of the famous works being premiered, many audiences did not sit in silence at all; they participated. They didn't necessarily dress up. They drank, they shouted encouragement, they might ask the performers to play something again; they might heckle - a bit like a pub gig. Some would take Opium (or 'do' drugs). But once the concept of 'classical music' arrived, 'musical art' became about passive reception, a bit like the 20th century record industry. Is music about creating something to be viewed and listened to reverentially, or is it about 'now'? Some pop stars considered themselves to be a modern version of what they assume 'classical music' was. And they had the perfect tools to justify this; they could be recorded; archived, captured for ever and poured over by academics' just the way classical music is.

Classical music and its modern counterpart - the music industry - produced not just music, but 'special music'; music to be revered. The irony now is that with the advent of the internet and the slow but inevitable painful death of the corporate recording machine, the labels and the populist inertia they cultivated, many believe music is achieving a kind of natural equilibrium; that is becoming more about the experience and less about the artefact; less about the product and more about the experience; less about blind unadulterated reverence and more about social enjoyment. Fewer people buy albums; iTunes proved that the natural unit of sale was the single.

People don't all want to buy physical products; they don't want CDs; they want to have access, not ownership. We are living in the last ten years of music being a physical 'product' at all. The death of the product pulls the carpet from under the feet of the 'majors' in a way nobody thought could happen. In the 90s none of the majors had technologists working for them. Record companies, famed for being able to see round corners, singularly failed to see the internet coming. Their primary task, it could be argued, was to try and detect and cultivate future trends – the next big thing – but they failed totally to see the future, even though it was there to be seen. They were caught napping and didn't see the future coming until it had already happened. So we ask ourselves, rhetorically, was music ever meant to achieve such apparent greatness and reverence? Was it capable of maintaining this level of praise and reverence? George Orwell, in a piece entitled 'Politics and the English Language', written in 1946, said: "In certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning." before later saying "...words fall upon the facts like snow, blurring the outline and covering up all the details." He wasn't referring to the way people are taught to revere and experience music in a certain way he might as well have been; there is a great parallel between what Orwell was saying and the way some history books and the 20th Century music industry chose to frame and deliver music. *Words fall like the facts like snow, blurring the outline and covering up the detail.*

The 19th Century music industry essentially told people to shut up and listen, and so did the 20th century record industry. Post-enlightenment history books told us music was all about the greatness of the individual. And then record companies created products, became gatekeepers and told us what to listen to. This has left pop music in a perilous state with no real idea about its identity as the post-record corporation era beckons. This is why more and more creative artists and composers are becoming *film composers*; as a way of expressing musically and commercially what they cannot achieve as under normal commercial conditions.

Innovation

Innovation has become a bit of a buzzword in recent times. Obviously it means 'originality' and is generally associated with modernism. But the context in which the word is used has evolved. Academic institutions are very keen on nurturing a sense of innovation; corporations pride themselves on being seen as innovative. Academic institutions pride themselves on rewarding work which takes 'creative risks'. But historically and practically, innovation is a natural occurrence; it is an occasional consequence and by-product of the creative mind. To presume that we can somehow force creative artists to be innovative merely by asking them, shows a fundamental lack of understanding of what innovation actually is and when and how it can happen. It is something which is so embedded in the creative process that trying to somehow separate it and 'make it happen' to order can be difficult and ill-advised. In some ways innovation has been turned from a concept, an ideal, to more of a mantra and a refrain. Like words such as 'genius' and 'art' it is simply an opinion, not a fact. It's turned from something we can say, on reflection, about a piece which, with hindsight, might be deemed to be innovative, into a something you can do *now* and know *now*. It also presupposes that innovation can be recognised as such at the time of its creation. Many innovations weren't recognised as such at the time, only on reflection. Sometimes only the context of time tells you whether something was innovative.

Also, subtle innovation happens every day and in the most obscure of places. In film music it might be a combination of specific harmonies, textures and production which allow us to think, long afterwards, *maybe this was innovative*. I can remember analysing Alexander Desplat's score for *Zero Dark Thirty*, with its evocative harmonies and striking textures, and thinking that it was quite innovative in that it hadn't been done before in that precise way. But this doesn't mean that something can be innovative simply on the basis of being new and 'different'. The more we examine the traditional terms we use to describe music the more we perhaps realise that many are opinions and not centred around 'facts'. This is why in my books I try to avoid terms which are too excitable or purely opinion-based. Sometimes innovation is subtle, delicate, restrained and sensitive. Sometimes people would never know they'd listened to something innovative. Therefore the problem with trying to force it or make it overt and italicised is that this can make it into a caricature. If we force people to try and feel like they must innovate, it may, conversely, compromise such innovation.

What is skill and what is art?

The fact that we see writing as a skill and composing as an art is telling; skill is something we can identify with, whereas art is just a word. We see writing as merely ‘clever’. We tend to use different levels of reverence and reverential words to describe different creative abilities in direct ratio to how much we can understand them. Composers are revered almost as Gods, not because they actually *are* Gods but because we don’t know how they do it, so *God* will do. Most refer to the likes of Beethoven and Mozart (and subsequently in the modern world Hans Zimmer and John Williams etc) as geniuses. When you think about it, genius is a handy word because nobody knows what that means either. And so the great befuddlement continues. A great many books which set out to shine a light on the world of composing only end up confirming just how terribly good composers were and how terribly unlikely it is that you will ever match them, unless you happen to *do it*, and then they’ll call you a genius too. And when people interview famous film composers mostly they continue the hero worship game with gushing questions like “where do your ideas come from” and “how did it feel to write the music for this film?” When composers do interviews they are to be forgiven for not ‘going off on one’ about immensely detailed aspects of their music because most listeners wouldn’t understand a word of it. So there is a tendency for the skill/art of music creation to remain unknown.

To read all this you may be forgiven for presuming a lack of proper respect or regard for composers and what they achieve. This couldn’t be further from the truth; I am a composer myself and the last thing I want to appear to do is denigrate what composers do. Great composers manage to manipulate and control the structures and tolerances of music, imposing their own character in places, creating wonderful colours and sometimes dark tensions through harmony, texture, arrangement and production. They manage to create great melodies which stick in the mind of cinema-goers long after the film has finished. But being a composer, orchestrator *and* a musicologist gives you a broader perspective from which you can draw more balanced and less hysterical opinions. My point is that what the great composers do is, ultimately, magnificently skilful. It is the application of great judgment, great organisation, great architecture and great commitment. To bury it in reverence and refer to it all as genius is actually demeaning because it presupposes that composers are born with special powers that weren’t the result of special effort. The same thing happens when we refer to composers as ‘gifted’ rather than ‘talented’. When one is called gifted it isn’t the accolade we imagine it to be because it almost implies that ability is an accident of birth; something which is gifted to us rather than something we worked hard to achieve. John Williams said “Any working composer will tell you that inspiration comes at the eighth hour of labour rather than as a bolt out of the blue. We have to get our vanities and our preconceptions out of the way....” Arguably the greatest film score composer who has ever lived clearly doesn’t see things through a self-reverential prism. He doesn’t seem to have much truck with fanciful notions of genius. He sees it for what it is; incredible talent and supreme skill, matched with a fantastic imagination and a tremendous work ethic. If we strip away daft metaphysical notion of genius we bring ourselves closer to knowing that composition isn’t the closed circle we may assume it is. It encompasses structure, which we can understand relatively easily. It encompasses arrangement, orchestration, texture, instrumentation, production. It is all those things to which we then add the one thing music doesn’t itself have; choice, opinion, judgment, attitude, perspective. *Then* we have music. It’s not impenetrable or unfathomable or indecipherable. It’s not about genius, magic or God; it is all explainable.

But that doesn’t mean it’s easy. The reason only a few succeed is not because it’s impossible unless you’re a genius; it is because it is so tremendously difficult to harness, reconcile and execute our imagination, creativity, ingenuity, skill, talent, expertise, judgement, perception, discrimination and mix it with an innate sense of structural and harmonic knowledge to make it into something which sounds new; not so new that it puts people off and not so predictable that people see it as a copy of someone else’s work. This is why it’s hard. If you’re a successful composer, this is what you’ve managed to do well. Composing is not impossible but it is difficult, gruelling, challenging, arduous and tiring. So it requires a rather odd combination of, on the one hand, someone who has a creative and imaginative free spirit, and on the other, someone who is focussed, dedicated, resolute, tenacious, obsessive and driven and who has gallons of realism, pragmatism, logicity. *That’s* why not many people do it and even less people succeed at it; not because it’s impossible but because it is hard. It requires such an odd combination of characteristics in order to compose professionally. Many people can compose music insofar as they can ‘think stuff up’. What makes composers into *successful* composers is the ability to close the deal, to zip the project up, to finish. A great many would-be composers have acres of ideas floating round in their studios or on paper. But it takes a different mentality to get it done and walk away. It takes a different mentality to finish the project and be prepared to be judged. Many people fear failure; this is what sometimes makes composers into terminal apologists for their own work when it is reviewed by their friends and contemporaries.

They talk of it ‘not being quite finished’ or of it ‘needing a bit of tweaking’ or ‘needing a different mix’ often as a tool to avoid the reality of a finished product. It is sometimes this inability to *conclude* that often separates the amateurs from the professionals. There is often a perception of artists as scatty, absent-minded, eccentric, dreamy, hare-brained individuals. Mostly this is untrue. They are often very strange people but if they were all as scatty as they are often portrayed to be, quite simply they wouldn’t get things done, or it would simply take too long. The one common denominator of successful film score writers is that they are all fantastically organised and driven to the point of obsession.

How we listen and how we write

If you read a book, become interested but then lose the book, you will no doubt feel frustrated. Similarly if you listen to a song on your iPod but it suddenly and unexpectedly breaks down, you may feel irritated. This is because our involvement with music and literature is structured. The human mind desires form. Accordingly *form* is a central requirement of most commercial arts, irrespective of the medium. Perception guides our awareness of form, but perception is not a solitary act; it is a constant activity. The mind is never truly at rest; it constantly seeks the reassurance and safe terrain of structure; of order. Music relies on this uniquely unifying quality of the human mind; the need for order. I say all this because writing music is, ultimately a trade-off between, on the one hand, preserving a sense of order and familiarity for the listener, and on the other hand, trying to inject sufficient surprise into the equation for it to be exciting. A constant theme of this series of books has been how to create something within film music that creates interest for the viewer/listener without disorientating them too much. Fortunately the very nature of film music and its function in movies frequently requires it to be anything but normal; if ‘normality’ (nice, safe and commercially accessible chord sequences one might find in song) is used in *incidental* film music which, for example, accompanies complex scenes and/or dialogue, it can sometimes be distracting. In normal environments listeners gravitate to normality; it is safe and reassuring territory which is why many songs are usually written in this way. But listening to it in a movie may pull listeners away from the film precisely because they recognise the shapes, the forms, the sounds; they start to listen to the music not the film. In incidental scenes especially, film music has to immerse itself deeply within the body of the film and make the film and its music into one experience. If music, for example, features broken harmonies, Pandiatonicism, cluster chords and other devices for reducing the *certainty* of the music, this can’t be rationalised as easily by the viewer so it sometimes becomes abstract and peripheral and in so doing essentially merges with the picture into one whole experience. We may think we’re listening independently and unilaterally to music in a film but we rarely are; what galvanises us the effortless way in which the music appears to *become* the film and vice versa.

Music works sometimes not by duplicating the onscreen emotion but sometimes simply by adding to it or by creating an emotion which might be needed but which isn’t present in the scene itself. Sometimes the specific emotion or character or flavour the film needs is something only music can provide. Because listeners don’t rationalise music literally or understand it in the same way they understand words and pictures, it manages to convey character and emotion subtly in a way nothing else can. Sometimes, when it is done well, music really does feel ‘at one’ with the film, as if part of the character of the picture is within the music that accompanies it. As I said earlier, a common sentiment about film music from viewers is that they don’t remember it or weren’t aware of it. Usually this means it is doing its job well. In such situations people obviously *did* hear the music and were aware of it, but it gelled so well with the film that it became a part of it. Or even if it didn’t ‘fit’ in a conventional sense and was instead there to contrast, what it did (e.g. its function) was so helpful that people simply rationalised it as part of the film, not the music.

The illusion of the tune

Even film music which seems, to the naked ear, commercial, tuneful, overt and exciting – such as John Williams’ magnificent ‘Flying Theme’ in the movie *E.T.* or his wonderful weepie music for the final scenes in *Close Encounters* – often contains pockets of harmonic or textural friction and tension one would rarely find in something that actually *was* as commercial and accessible as people think it is. In fact one of the aspects of Williams’ greatness is his ability to create wonderful music which seems effortlessly simple and completely accessible, but which in reality is forensically structured to deliver stunning moments of tension and colour. If it seems simple, sometimes it just *seems* that way. People usually don’t notice these specifics in the *Flying Theme*; all they know is that the music is fabulous. One of the reasons it *is* fabulous is because of the supportive orchestration, harmonies and voicings that wrap themselves around the theme and immerse it in a juxtaposed mixture of tension and beauty and abstraction that can only usually be achieved via harmony and texture.

Only when you unpick the compositional form of Williams and unravel the often complex harmonies, textures and voicings in the orchestrations do you fully appreciate this. The point I'm making is that the success of film music is a product of how well you deliver an idea into the existing artistic and commercial framework of a film. The mind seeks order but also wants excitement, surprise, wonder; even shock. Stories, whether they are delivered in a book or in a movie, try to embrace the need for order *and* excitement. So when music is added, one of the greatest skills of the composer is the way they read the film; the degree to which they understand what emotion the film has already delivered, before the music is added. Then they look for the gaps; the spaces for music to join the film, for it to have a function. Also, understanding the way a film is supposed to be perceived by the audience is one of the most important skills of a composer. It could be said that quite a few of the most important skills and talents of a successful composer actually have nothing to do with writing music; they are to do with initial perceptions and judgements. If your initial reaction and judgement is right, the music will work. When movie goers refer to 'great music' what they're really talking about, first and foremost, is that the idea was right; the concept was good and the function the music provides is helpful, even critical, to the film. If the concept (e.g. the idea, the style, the function you choose to provide, the orchestration you choose, the style of approach and where you place it) is inappropriate, the music you choose to pour into that conceptual framework might not work, no matter what you write; not because the music is 'bad', but because the decision to use it in the way you did at the time you did, was bad.

How music leads us into temptation

In volumes I and II we regularly spoke about how composers manage to confound our expectations; about how *surprise* is one of the most exciting musical experiences. Sometimes, when this is so subtle that it is not even consciously noticed by the listener, the composer has succeeded in manipulating our listening, deciding when, where and how we will enjoy the music. Musical expectation, like dramatic expectation, is partly learned. We try to grasp structure and form in order to make sense of the world, and the way we interact with music is no different. The fact that many of these structural expectations are not only learned but are also part of a shared reality, makes it easier for composers to manipulate a great many people, rather than just one. If we all behaved differently and responded to different things in radically different ways, society wouldn't function and we would live in a world of chaos. Similarly if we listened in radically different ways and responded to different individual characteristics in totally different ways, music might end up meaning very little to most people; it would be a sound and not an experience. Music is a shared reality that we enjoy in similar ways. Great composers are people who, in addition to possessing an outstanding knowledge of music, have understood how music structure works and how to use it to create music that people respond to. People are seduced into the presumption that every piece of music is intrinsically different, but in truth most of what we listen to, when it is stripped of its surface-level stylistics, is very similar. If we look at the vast possibilities and potentialities that even conventional music structure offers us and then reflect on the diet of comparative similarity and resemblance we are subjected to, we begin to realise how narrow our diet of music is. But this same comparative undernourishment is also what makes us so prone to being so controllable and malleable; because our diet of music is, for the most part, relatively normalised, good composers know instinctively which buttons to press to excite us, which buttons to press to confound us and which buttons to press to sadden us.

What is film music?

The very first quote that appeared in volume I referenced Irving Thalberg, an MGM producer from the 1920s, who said, "*There never was a silent film. We'd finish a picture, show it in our projection room and come out shattered. It was awful. Then we'd show it in a theatre, with a girl down in the pit pounding away at a piano, and it would make all the difference in the world. Without music there wouldn't have been a film industry at all*" It's easy to accept what an integral part of the process music is to film, but before we launch into volume III we should once again take a moment to reflect on what a truly bizarre phenomenon film music is. Its inclusion is massively at odds with the supposed realism of the photographed moving image. Our experience of film music is radically at odds with our experience of the world. Why is it apparently natural and normal to have music played to accompany scenes which, in the real world the movie is attempting to mimic, would sound absurd? Our journey through life is normally not accompanied by an orchestra, so why does it work in film? As we deduced in previous volumes, the reason music works is because it draws you closer to the film. Why does it need to do this? In normal life we don't need a soundtrack because we're actually there, living it. But with film we're presented with a two-dimensional image attempting to mimic reality. Pictures and words are convincing to a degree but music essentially creates an emotional bond between the viewer and the story.

One of film music's biggest functions is to make the story believable. This is sometimes why music which simply duplicates or emphasises often overstates and overcooks, turning drama into melodrama. Often, but not always, music which offers 'something else' (something which mitigates or assuages) succeeds in making the unbelievable believable; it softens us up to the notion of the story, often not by reinforcing it but by offering subtle platitudes which bring us closer to the story. Viewers are largely unaware of this because they never see scenes with music *without* music. These kinds of contexts are never seen or heard, similar to the unfinished book or the part-written song. The public are presented with the finished article, not the constituent parts. They experience the outcome, not the journey, which is another reason the whole thing can appear so bedazzling. Film music's function is to reinforce our emotional reactions, but because people love music but have no understanding of the creative compositional process, 'listening' is a comparatively inexact process and experience (compared to how we see and understand words and images). It is this uncertainty that makes people curious and it is this uncertainty that almost forces listeners to attempt to interpret on a deeper, subtler level and it is this that makes music such a great and natural accompaniment to the rather more defined world of words and pictures. In short, we 'get' the pictures and we understand the words but music is different; the experience of listening is something where we're in our element but out of our depth. This subtle and beautiful confusion is what can make music the most wonderful experience of all and it is why it works so well in film, because it sometimes lessens the absoluteness of the images and the narrative and allows for more involvement and personal interpretation. Music essentially aids our understanding and 'reading' of a film. But the fact that it *works* ought not to be taken for granted, almost as if it is the *idea* of using music that works, rather than the music itself. The reason it works is because it is fantastically well crafted by the composers and orchestrators and mix engineers and of course by the director, whose vision the composers attempt to satisfy and embellish.

Why do people attach such importance to the wordless language of music?

Heinrich Heine, a German poet, journalist, essayist and literary critic (1797-1856), famously said, "Where words leave off, music begins." If he's right, what does music 'do' that words or pictures don't manage to do? Words communicate fairly literally because they form a language we all understand; but, we might ask, do all languages need words in order to communicate at a basic level? With music, peoples' cognitive functions such as observation, memory, attention and expectation, are all stimulated but by something most people fundamentally do not understand and, most importantly, cannot see. Music is often spoken about and discussed in abstract, easily digestible metaphorical language. Journalistic articles about film music in the music press are perhaps sometimes the most laughable of all because you can feel someone trying to articulate and explain the colour and emotion and meaning of music by mainly using terminology which isn't up to the job. Sometimes it is hopelessly general, vague, imprecise and ambiguous. Therefore we become accustomed to reading and learning about music in bland, general terms and a kind of intellectual equivalent of pigeon English. The use of music theory, a language that would shed real light on the subject, is rarely employed because people reading an article or book would rarely possess the ability to understand and interpret in this way. One of the reasons why music is not considered to be a literal form of communication is because most people can't understand its language.

Some have used various language analogies to underplay the role music theory knowledge plays in understanding music. They say someone who can't read written English would still benefit from a book that was read to them regardless of the fact that they couldn't see it. Of course this is true as long as the listener understands the words. For some what follows is that 'reading' music doesn't necessarily give you a better insight into music than listening to it. But this is where the analogy falls apart. It is likely that an illiterate person understands words even if he/she cannot read them on paper but it is highly unlikely that a musically illiterate person would be able to comprehend and understand harmonic interactions if he/she couldn't read them. With the exception of blind people who, regardless of their lack of sight, understand chord and note names and how they function, I am yet to meet anyone who has a great knowledge of harmony but cannot understand the theory behind it. Knowledge of harmony is a *product* of the theory. You can't have one without the other.

As I stated earlier, for most, listening to music is an inexact process. For most listeners music lacks the 'certainty' of words and lacks the absolute concrete meaning inherent in most images. Words and images are understood, interpreted and rationalised by most people but music is not. Therefore any emotion we feel through music is generated without people fully understanding how and why it's happening. The fact that most people don't understand music is its great strength, because it manages to communicate emotion and 'meaning' without being understood. Being confronted with something that changes you but which you don't fully understand can be a wonderful experience.

Music works in movies because it gels together the clarity of pictures and the certainty of words with something which lends them an extra, deeper context – one which contains slight meaning. If they were able to recognise, classify and understand the relevance of the harmonies as easily as they do with pictures, the cat would be out of the bag; the genie would be out of the bottle, never to return. For most composers this would be a different world because most people would know what they did and how they did it. But if music's effect (its 'meaning') is imprecise and nebulous and subtly different in each listener, how does it manage to create often quite targeted and specific responses in listeners. If listeners don't 'understand' and music lacks the certainty of words or images, how can it manage to articulate specific, almost forensically targeted emotion? The reason is that although we are all individuals most of our responses are actually not hugely personalised. People generally respond the same way to most things. Life and existence is a 'shared reality' – our responses to music tend, on the whole, to be something great composers can predict with a high level of precision and create with relative ease. To know how to compose is to know what you want to say, to have clarity about what emotion you want to create, and to know which buttons to press to achieve your goal.

How does music create emotion?

To quote Leopold Stokowski ("A painter paints pictures on canvas. Composers paint their pictures on silence."), it is interesting to compare how composers create emotion with how other artists do the same thing. Playwrights, novelists, poets, film directors, choreographers, comedians, magicians – their job is to create emotions within us. Therapists, games designers, carnival operators and traffic engineers have good reason to study what engages our responses and emotions, as have advertisers and politicians. The one thing all these have in common is that they are generating emotions using things we all understand – language and pictures. Composers must create emotion through abstract non-representational harmonies and textures. Where a comedian might find laughter through parody, wordplay or absurdity, what does a composer do? Magicians evoke awe by appearing to transgress the laws of physics, what does a composer do to create 'awe'? Despite these difficulties composers have demonstrated skill in evoking often quite specific emotion. Is that because of their greatness? Is it genius simply because only a few have bothered to find out how to communicate with people through music? Is it magic, or is it because there are an almost limitless number of pre-set harmonic and textural functions which have been proven to evoke emotion in an almost limitless set of circumstances, a few of which the composer has understood, harnessed and manipulated? The reason music is such a permanent and invaluable accompaniment to film is because it is less definite, less understood and less comprehended. It takes the certainty out of a situation and makes us *think*. It heightens our senses and our awareness. This process makes us enjoy the film on a deeper level than we would have because the process brings us closer to the story. Wagner knew all this; he said that the music of the future would be 'closely linked to dramatic narrative' adding that music would 'bring out those details of the drama that could not be spoken or shown'. Never a truer word was spoken.

A final thought in this introduction centres round how much of the process of creating great music is actually about composing. We interpret composing as something we do when we create music. But actually, as most film composers would tell you, composing music is often the culmination of a bigger process. Composition is often the conclusion to a much bigger procedure. Composing film music is firstly about how we interpret the emotion we feel from watching a scene or reading a story, and only then about how we turn this into music. It is primarily about how we conceptualise and formulate our feelings and responses and turn them into plans; it is about how we interpret the film and the story and decide what musical palette to use. It's about how we decide to colour the film in. Then we write music.