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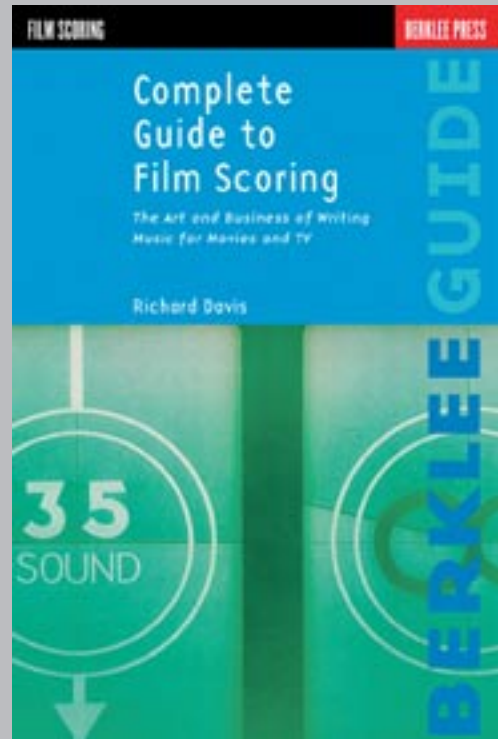
**Complete Guide to Film Scoring:  
The Art and Business of Writing  
Music for Movies and TV**

Richard Davis

Chapter 9  
Spotting

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# CHAPTER 9

## Spotting

*What you're trying to do is to catch the spirit of a picture. And that means sometimes you go contrary to what's on the screen, and sometimes you go with what's on the screen. It's a matter of instinct; if your instincts are good, it's going to work for you.*

—David Raksin

Of the many elements that go into creating the music for a film, one of the most crucial is spotting. *Spotting* refers to where the music goes and what it will sound like. Frankly, one could have fabulous themes, sparkling orchestration, great players and a terrific creative relationship with the director, but if the music comes in and out at the wrong places, it can ruin a film. If a particular instrument enters in a way that is obtrusive, it can destroy the dramatic impact of a scene. If the overall sound and texture of the music is light and bright, but the film is dark and brooding, clearly that will not work. Psychologically, if the music does not fit like a glove in the way the costumes, lighting, and sets do, the audience gets distracted consciously or subconsciously. Therefore, the music's starts and stops, swells and retreats, and specific instrumentation and textures are carefully crafted to fulfill specific dramatic functions. This cannot be overemphasized. The point of the music is to further the story, to move the drama along, or tell us something about the characters or situation. In order to accomplish this, the music must be placed sensitively. When music is present in the film, it must be there for a reason, or it is probably not necessary.

The beginning composer should understand that effective spotting is a skill that comes with experience, so patience is in order. Many composers just starting out make the familiar mistakes of writing too many cues, over-writing the individual cue (as the Emperor said to Mozart: "Too many notes!"), and starting a cue too strongly (for example, using strings in a thick chord when a gentle unison would be

better). Learning when to bring the music right in on a cut, and when you can be early or late, is a skill that comes with experience. In addition, as a composer becomes more experienced after scoring many different kinds of scenes, his insight becomes more finely tuned to what is on the screen and the intentions of the director. There are some general concepts that can guide this process:

1. *You are a partner in mixed media.* In most cues, music accompanies an actor's lines, creates a bridge from scene to scene, or gently helps to enhance the drama in a subtle way. In these scenes, the music is truly in the background. In a few situations, the music gets to stand out on its own—the action scenes, love scenes, and grand vistas of mountains or oceans. And these scenes also require sensitivity to how the music fits dramatically with what has happened and what is about to happen.
2. *Does there need to be music?* One must be absolutely sure that a given scene needs music. This surety can come in the form of a gut feeling, a plot driven need, or the director's request (whether or not you are in agreement). Points to consider include the dramatic needs, as well as what music has come just before or just after the scene in question.
3. *If there is music, what am I trying to say with it?* Asking this question helps keep the composer focused. It forces him to form an intent that gives an overall guideline for the emotional impact of the music. This goes beyond happy, sad, light, dark, etc. Similar questions are: Am I moving the drama forward? Am I expressing this character's thoughts or feelings appropriately? What instruments will accomplish these goals best?

Remembering these points helps keep the music a carefully considered element of the film, not just a composer's creative whim. If the composer is clear on why the music is there and what it is trying to accomplish, then his job is that much easier. The music then becomes a whole organic piece, not just a series of short musical sequences.

Elmer Bernstein speaks about how he begins conceiving music for a film:

*I spot a film strictly as a dramatist. I'm not thinking of music at all when I spot a film. I look at a scene and say: Should this scene have music? Why should it have music? If it does have music, what is the music supposed to be doing? That's my process.*

After the picture is locked, the composer meets with the director, music editor, and sometimes the producer and film editor. They review the film and discuss where the music will go, what it should sound like, and which dramatic situations to emphasize (or de-emphasize). This is called a *spotting session*. At this meeting the film is discussed scene by scene to determine the need for music, and to discuss what the music should sound like—what style, instruments, and emotions are musically necessary. The music editor takes notes for the composer regarding specific timings of cues and dramatic hits (see chapter 10). This meeting is the time when different approaches should be discussed, e.g., to play through a certain piece of action, to emphasize it, or to foreshadow an event or not. Keep in mind that most directors have no formal musical background and must speak in layman's terms, not musical terms. He might try to sound informed about many different styles of music when the breadth of his knowledge lies somewhere between the Beatles and Puff Daddy. Or he might have been a classical piano major in college and have thorough knowledge of the classical masters as well as current pop styles. The composer must find a way to understand the director's desire and translate his words into musical ideas.

Alan Silvestri has a wonderful relationship with several directors, and understands the pressure the director can feel, and how that pressure affects his relationship with the composer:

*You've got to remember what you're doing here. You're working for somebody, and you, the composer, are not going to be the one called on the carpet when the movie was supposed to make \$40 million this weekend and it only made \$150,000 ... You're probably off on your next movie, but there's somebody out there who's sitting in a chair right now with a bunch of people in suits standing*

*around him, and he's having a real bad day. That person's called the director! So if you think for a minute that the director is not going to have a whole lot to say about what kind of music goes into their film and how it sounds, you're kidding yourself.*

Spotting is the first step towards completing a successful score. It must be done carefully, sensitively, and with the understanding that the music is a partner with the drama, as the composer is a partner with the director. Sometimes this partnership is smooth with excellent give and take. There can also be considerable friction if the director (or producer) requests a certain style or musical idea that the composer finds objectionable. As mentioned previously, it is in these situations that the composer must decide whether to argue with the director, or to go along with his wishes. (This is often where the “temp track” can be useful. More about this in chapter 10.) Ultimately, the composer’s job is twofold in nature: one, he must please those who have hired him, and two, he must do it in such a way that his musical integrity remains intact. Being a film composer involves an enormous amount of flexibility and sensitivity, with a handful of diplomacy thrown in for good measure. One must be a good communicator, and especially have the ability to listen and transfer into musical terms what a director is saying.

When I was scoring the TV series, *Monsters*, each episode had a different director. At one spotting session, the director said he wanted the opening to “float, like the beginning of *Citizen Kane*.” Now, anyone who has seen this 1941 movie with that awesome Bernard Herrmann score will remember that the opening music features very low-end woodwinds playing non-functional harmonies. To me, it doesn’t float; it actually is very heavy, and I feel “sinks” would be a better term. I had to translate what he was really saying. After looking at the show in question, I realized that the operative description was the director wanting the sound of Herrmann’s score in *Citizen Kane*, not to the adjective “float.” I wrote something low, dark, and ominous and it was just what he wanted.

Clear communication between composer and director is essential. The director’s vision of the film is the most comprehensive, and his

abstract ideas for cues may provide keen insight into the type of musical ideas that will make a score succeed. The composer must help these ideas evolve into actual music.

Elmer Bernstein reflects on conceiving the music for *The Rainmaker* as a result of conversations with director Francis Ford Coppola:

*I have to credit Francis with the bluesy 6/8 idea in a roundabout way. What happened was, when I first got on The Rainmaker, Francis wasn't going to have a score as we know a score to be. At first, he was going to go the B.B King route—in other words, real Memphis stuff with some very minor connective things in scoring. But as he began to develop the film itself, he began to feel that he needed to depend more on score. So it was my decision to use the Hammond B3 organ, but it came out of his idea of Memphis ambience. Out of that ambience, I retained the three instruments you hear a great deal of: the Hammond B3, the muted trumpet, and the guitar. But that came out of Francis' original concept.*

*When I came on Rainmaker it was in rough-cut form, and the version I finally recorded to was version #26. It went through some amazing changes. The interesting thing about Francis is that each time he changed the film it was for the better. He wasn't just fooling around, he was just "finding" the film, so to speak.*

The most important element of the *spotting session* is clear communication with the director. Once the composer and director share the same vision for the music, then the composer can get to work writing the score. However, there are still many spotting decisions to be made. The music can begin right on a cut, a few seconds before it, or even right after it. It can start immediately after an important line of dialogue, or it can wait and let that line sink in. It can foreshadow a dangerous situation, or play it more neutrally. There are countless spotting decisions to be made that will affect the drama, and the audience's experience of the story. How these decisions are made will be a combination of the composer's experience, his dramatic sensitivity, and the director's wishes.