

MA in Commercial Music Production
University of Wales Trinity Saint David

‘Fantasia Reimagined’

Jennifer Jade Bevan

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Reflective Commentary

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1. Introduction

In my proposal I set out a plan to create around thirty minutes worth of contemporary music to be used in place of the existing classical score of Disney's *Fantasia*. The backbone of my idea was fairly safe and simple in that I could theoretically complete the project without needing to rely on anything besides myself and my computer. My finished project is therefore very close to what I imagined it would be with few hiccups and obstacles, however that's not to say that I didn't meet challenges and play around with different ideas along the way - something I will discuss further in sections 2 and 5.

As I mentioned in my proposal essay, my initial motivation for the *Fantasia* project was very passion and sentiment driven, however, before I settled on it I did some reflection and research which reassured me that I was making a pragmatic decision that underpins my career aspirations.

Various projects that I've worked on for and alongside my masters have piqued my interest in the television and film sync industry. One of my assignments required me to find around ten briefs and compose tracks that could be submitted for each one. The track that I found the most enjoyable to create and had the most successful end result was the one written to a television brief. I also came across and a competition online which asked entrants to sync music to a trailer for the Netflix series *Bridgerton*, and I found this really fun to do, and regardless of whether I win the competition I am satisfied with the final piece - there is something about having your composition synced with film that gives it a finality. I find it is easier to 'know' when it is finished rather than getting to a point where it could be finished but you're unsure whether you should add a bit more or change something or take it in a completely different direction.

Although syncing music to existing visuals is my preferred method and obviously what I have chosen to do for my final project, I'm also keen to explore the other approaches to becoming a composer for television and film, and this is looked at in section 3.5.

2. My portfolio

My portfolio consists of five tracks of varying lengths. Each track is made to synchronize with a different scene or section of scene from Disney's *Fantasia*. Whereas the original score consists entirely of classical pieces, I have made original music that is contemporary in style, using elements of several genres including electronica, ambient, rock, metal, jazz, synth pop and hip hop throughout the tracks. I have also experimented with sound effects and plunderphonics. For the purposes of this essay I will refer to the scenes as: The Sorcerer's Apprentice (part 1), The Sorcerer's Apprentice (part 2), The Centaur Scene, The Ostrich Scene and The Seasons (this is the order they appear in my project).

3. Research

3.1 Music and its use in visual media

Non-diegetic music is used so frequently in film and television that it often goes unnoticed. Perhaps you would notice it if it was not there - indeed films that don't have a score are far rarer and more noteworthy than ones that do. Not including music is a decision that is often made in an attempt to create a sense of rawness and realism, such as in *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *The Network* (1976) and *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975). But, the addition of a musical score is almost as conventional as scene changes and dialogue. It's no secret that music is usually used in visual media to enhance or manipulate the audience's emotions: 'we can recognise musical clichés, the jaunty tune that appears during a happy scene, the sombre dirge that accompanies a funeral situation. These have become internalised in us to the point that we no longer really think about them' (Donnelly, 2019). In *Fantasia*, the ability of music to convey emotion is really put to the test. Of course, *Fantasia* is unconventional because the musical score *replaces* the dialogue.

I had little experience with syncing music with moving images ahead of doing this project. The only previous experience I had was entering the *Bridgerton* trailer competition which was a slightly different project as a) it was much shorter and b) as it was music for a trailer, it was mainly there to create a 'mood' behind the dialogue rather than be in place of any dialogue. I

thought that adding music and effects to a scene in order to reflect and enhance the emotions that are being portrayed by the characters would be fairly intuitive, but I set out to do a little bit of research on ‘the art of music sync’ at the beginning of my project to make sure I was on the right track and in case it sparked any ideas that I wouldn’t have otherwise thought of.

One of the first articles I read was *The Methodology Behind Great Sync: A Breakdown for Brands, Content Creators and Supervisors* (Bellotti, 2022) which is really about how to effectively match the right existing track to a brand, however there was a sentence that caught my interest: ‘the goal may aim to precisely match the sonic and visual moods, or it may strive to alter the viewers’ perception through the purposeful use of music’. I had been concerned with precisely matching the moods created by the animation and thought I would consider my project successful if I achieved that, but I have always been interested in how sounds can alter the audience’s perceptions of visuals (and vice versa) and also the use of dissonant music in film and television. I kept this in mind whilst working on the project.

3.2 Career research

One of the things that’s cemented my interest in composing music for sync is the growth of the industry itself and the individual benefits of creating music for film and TV sync over courting commercial success.

Seven years ago Neale (2015) talked about the recent evolution of syncing music to visual media, citing 2014 as a year that saw a 6.4% rise in income from music used in British TV programmes, movies, adverts and video games. Music body BPI confirms that this is still the case in 2022 describing it as ‘an area of revenue growth for labels in recent years’. It naturally took a hit in 2020 due to the pandemic - but in 2021 was already showing signs of ‘healthy recovery... yielding £30.8 million’ (BPI 2022).

From my research I’ve distinguished three main avenues to getting your compositions used in film and television: 1) upload your existing music to libraries and wait to be contacted b) seek out briefs and submit compositions that fit 3) seek out contacts (music supervisors etc) and pitch

your existing music to them. There is a lot of information and advice out there from people in the industry on youtube videos, blogs, articles and chat room posts. There is obviously varying degrees of reliability, and some of the advice is contradictory, but there is one prudent message that seems to run throughout all of it and that is: do your own research and find out what's right for you and your music.

Jesse Josefsson, who is a TV/film composer and founder of the online educational platform 'Sync My Music' expounds the benefits of composing for visual media in general, and of doing this via music libraries specifically. Based on his own experiences he emphasizes how it's not an industry that you need fans or a record deal to do well in. He also claims that 'the vast majority of the music [that you hear on television and film] is made by 'stay-at-home producers' which is something that appeals to me as I have recently spent a lot of money getting my home studio more or less exactly how I want it. Other pros mentioned are the reliability of upfront payment if your music is used, plus the potential for gaining royalties back through performing rights organisations (I am already a member of the UK's PRS Foundation), and the smaller amount of restrictions in terms of what type of music you create - i.e. there's not the same need to cater to or be ahead of the game in terms of what's popular. He then goes on to talk about some genres that tend to do well in the sync business: 'rock, pop, hip hop, EDM, orchestral - which can include trailer and minimal music - corporate, and latin music'. As mentioned he is particularly keen on music libraries and even states that 'all that matters in this industry is that you have high-quality music and partner with high-quality libraries' and that 'you do not need to hunt down music supervisors or producers or directors of movies or TV shows in order to get your track placed' and even states 'I don't recommend that approach'. I found this surprising so I sought some further research into this which I will go on to discuss later on in this section.

The main 'takeaway' following my initial research on music libraries is that there is no one size fits all approach. In order to utilize music libraries effectively the onus is on you as the composer to do research specific to your own output and expectations. It is difficult to tease out the reliable advice from the highly subjective and even the ad revenue driven, but the most helpful guidance came in the form of questions to ask yourself: 1) 'What's your niche?'. This is because getting your music noticed by the right person may require categorizing it more specifically than

identifying it with a broad genre such as ‘hip-hop’ or ‘rock’ 2) ‘What’s your focus? Are you a composer first and foremost? Or do you also have aspirations as a performing artist? Your music licensing strategy should vary greatly depending on your ambitions’ 3) ‘Where are you now?’ I.e.: Is your music good quality? Do you already have a brand? (and if so how big?) Do you currently have a large or small music catalogue? (Kettering, 2018).

From the back of this advice I did some research into specific music libraries and intend to upload some music from my existing catalogue to a variety. I will begin by uploading selected tracks to Songtradr as a starting point as 1) you can create a free account 2) it appears to be user-friendly and flexible. I’ll then start submitting more music to large libraries that accept a broad range of genres and then narrow down my focus and start targeting specific libraries with specific genres based on what they specialise in. Trial and error is put forward as the best way to discover what works best for you and your music along with research. I’m also considering using a pseudonym that isn’t already associated with my existing brand (i.e. Avamo) as that will give me more room to make ‘errors’ that won’t impact other facets of my music career.

Although I’m cautious of the motivations behind advice on various internet articles and YouTube videos, a lot of it comes across as fairly sound and sensible - the only ‘red flag’ is that a lot of the information available makes it seem too easy - as if you can just upload music for free and then sit and wait for the money to come rolling in - so I went digging a little deeper into the hows and whats. Unlike Josefsson, Kettering suggests to pitch music to ‘music supervisors/indie filmmakers/production companies that are accepting submissions’ and similar advice is echoed elsewhere.

Of course, the TV and film sync industry is no less competitive than the commercial music industry. There are millions of tracks out there versus relatively few people and companies looking for new music. An article on PRS for Music’s website which collates various voices from the industry (Awbi, 2018) advises that you involve a third party agent, whether that be ‘a publisher, a strong sync team at a record label or it’s through someone like Woodwork’ - at least if you’re going to be actively pitching - as ‘if [submissions are] unsolicited then they do tend to go to the bottom of the pile’. This is of course only applies if you’re choosing to pitch, which

Josefsson (2022) doesn't recommend, but Awbi's article seems to imply this is the way to go - there is in fact no mention of libraries at all here - and there's the overall indication that if you want a chance of getting your music noticed there's a lot more legwork involved than Josefsson seems to profess in his various YouTube videos. Sentric Music's Patrick Cloherty advises to 'have as many versions of the track as you can, have an instrumental version, have a radio edit, if it's got any swearing in it, get rid of that'. Cloherty advises to always jump on the opportunity to capitalise on a sync deal if such an opportunity arises - for example a piece of track played once on a popular television programme may not necessarily generate a lot of revenue, but the potential for people 'Shazaming' tracks is high, and an artist who already has a strong brand and media presence and is poised to engage with new fans will be in a better position than one who isn't.

I feel convinced from the industry research I've undertaken so far that the best way to begin is to get as much music in as many libraries as possible for as little money as possible, and have those perhaps being chosen for sync and perhaps not, but having those in the background whilst in the meantime carefully crafting pitches and cleverly targeting the right music supervisors in the right way at the right time. I am not yet at the stage where I have created pitches or conducted enough research into the world of music supervisors to begin this journey, but that is these two steps along with uploading to music libraries are next on my agenda.

Although I am particularly keen to explore and get my foot into the TV and film sync industry, I am not closing off other avenues. I have referenced in my 'Personal Development Plan For The Future' in section 6 that I still have aspirations to become a freelance topliner and I will continue to build my online brand and be open to most music industry related opportunities.

4. 'Personal Development Plan'

Objectives What do I want to learn and develop?	- Become more proficient at mixing and learn the art of mastering	Obstacles	- Lack of experience - Lack of opportunity to practise
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	- Build a portfolio which I can use to apply to jobs and approach music supervisors		mastering skills on a 'fresh' track which isn't my own
Actions What do I have to do to achieve this?	- Just keep using my ears and using trial and error to get the effect I want whilst working on my own tracks - Network and reach out to other artists who either need their track/s mastered and are willing to have it done for free by someone who is looking to hone their skills rather than a tried and tested professional OR set up some sort of exchange programme with other artists who are also looking to hone similar skills so we can practise on	Review How did I do?	Successes - My mixing skills have definitely improved over the course of this project. I feel as though I understand mixing in a way that I didn't before - I have just begun an online course in mastering and I am already beginning to feel as though something is clicking Improvements still to be made - still have a little way to go with mixing e.g. I struggle to get things loud enough whilst mixing - Still have a long way to go with

	each other's tracks - Undertake a course which is specifically geared towards teaching mastering skills		mastering - I need to complete this course and put plan to network with other artists and practise my mastering skills on their tracks into action
Criteria How will I know I've achieved this?	- Although I am finding it challenge to learn mastering skills, I can generally hear when something has been mastered well and when it hasn't - But I will also require objective feedback along the way to make sure I'm on the right track	Start date	- Portfolio: 14th August 2022 - Mixing skills - began the early stages of developing these near the beginning of music career in 2020 - Mastering - began online course October 20th 2022
Resources What resources will I access?	- As many unmastered tracks as possible - both my own and other people's - Online mastering course	End date	- Portfolio: <i>Fantasia</i> project completed on 15th October, but I will continue to build on that so 'ongoing' - Mixing - ongoing - Mastering -

			ongoing, but (short) online course should be completed in a few days
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5. Reflection

Overall, I am very happy with my finished product. It aligns more or less exactly with what I envisioned at the beginning of my project, just with a few minor differences both in terms of what the finished project ‘looks’ like and what my plans are for it.

In terms of what the finished project ‘looks’ like: in my proposal I set out to use a different genre for each scene. The scenes vary in length, and at that point I wasn’t sure which scenes I was going to score, and so I estimated that to end up with about thirty minutes’ worth of music I would have around seven tracks of around five minutes each. What I have ended up with is five tracks, and rather than having a different genre for each track I have five tracks which would all fall under the broad umbrella of ‘electronica’, but that each sample sounds from a plethora of genres. This wasn’t a conscious decision, more something that happened organically as I synced music in response to what I saw on the screen, but I am happy with this outcome. The scenes are quite long - even though I have had to edit some content out of them (see 5.1) they result in tracks which are: 3 minutes 55 seconds, 5 minutes 27 seconds, 7 minutes 50 seconds, 3 minutes 40 seconds and 10 minutes 27 seconds. A secondary aim was for the music to work as standalone tracks as well as sync music. Although my audience feedback does suggest that they are successful as tracks in their own right (with some caveats - see 5.2) they would be quite long for commercial pop tracks, which tend to be around three minutes and no longer than five (Van Buskirk 2021, McKinney 2015) and are only getting shorter (Lutz, 2019). Also, of course there are no vocals (something else discussed in section 5.2) and most commercially popular tracks do, but I don’t see this an issue because it wasn’t an aim to make tracks that would work as commercially successful tracks necessarily - rather the aim was to make tracks which could be listened to and enjoyed without the visual.

In terms of my future plans for the project: I had intended to a) upload the final video/s to

YouTube and b) use it as part of a portfolio which I could put forward when approaching people professionally. I was unsure, however, how usable the project would be in its entirety outside of an academic setting due to the copyright implications. I wasn't sure what the exact legalities were in terms of whether or not you could use samples from recordings and animations made as recently as the 1940s. I had intended to consult a professional to get a definitive answer - but before doing that I realised that my main and unequivocal issue was a lot more cut-and-dried - and that is that Disney is extremely protective of the characters themselves regardless of any other details. Even if *Fantasia* itself was made long enough ago to be out of copyright, the image of, say, Mickey Mouse, can never be used freely by third parties. With this in mind I just went ahead and used whatever I wanted in order to end up with a finished product that I was happy with for the purposes of the assignment without worrying too much about what I will and won't be able to do with it afterwards. Now that I have the finished product, I feel confident that I have something that I could use professionally as a good example of my syncing skills, and that is more important than whether I can share it with a wider audience via YouTube or similar channels.

5.1 Issues Encountered

Whilst working on this I encountered some issues that were very specific to the project I had chosen. In my proposal I was weighing up how much, if any, of the original recordings/compositions to use, with both creative and legal issues in mind. I decided in the end to include snippets from the original recordings, but very sparingly. That way, I have the element of the old, vintage sound (harking back to the targeting of 'the nostalgic consumer' as discussed in my proposal essay) but if I needed to remove these elements for any reasons, legal or otherwise, I could do so without too much hassle. This decision introduced some technical issues, however, which seem specific to working with an existing orchestral soundtrack. I had to do a lot of side chaining because there's a lot of high-end frequencies in orchestral music. I had a fight between side chaining, compression, drums, and low-end frequencies. I was struggling to get them to not clash with each other so that there was enough of a gap for it to happen simultaneously without the sound becoming muddy. I had to cut out segments from the original orchestral music and bring down the low-end even further - which in turn made it even more

high-end, which is hard on the ears - a brittle sound - and so in addition to the side chaining I used a filter from Sound Toys. The fact that I was working with an old recording was also a challenge. The sound of *Fantasia*'s original soundtrack is (especially by comparison to the very clear, clean sounds of contemporary samples, and in spite of the quality still being in many ways impressive) quite muffled and distorted. I could hear a lot of white noise, and the more I played with the EQ, the more it brought out the white noise. I used filters, again from Sound Toys, to mask this a bit, and also to make it sit further back in the mix, because orchestral music is very 'in your face' and there are also a lot of changes in volume.

In *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (part 2) my sound effects aren't as concentrated because it took a lot of work to get the guitars not to all fight for space and become distorted. I also feel as though there are fewer effects in this some compared to the others. Towards the end of the project I purchased new speakers. The Centaur Scene was made entirely using these, and I believe using these speakers has elevated the quality of this track ever so slightly as I was able to hear everything more clearly. I did go back and touch up each scene following this purchase, but I do think that scenes such as *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* would have benefited from being composed from scratch using these speakers.

5.2 Achievements

I mentioned in my proposal essay that I wanted to do the original version of *Fantasia* justice as regards to outstanding sound quality of the original - indeed Disney was so devoted to giving the audience the illusion of being amidst a live orchestra that new surround sound technology which came to be known as 'Fantasound' was developed specially for the film (Garity and Hawkins, 1941). I originally toyed with the idea of using live instruments, but ultimately decided to go down a different route entirely and compose the tracks using samples and plugins exclusively. This was for reasons of both convenience and quality. For previous projects I've used a combination of plugins, samples and instruments, but leaned more heavily on the instruments (guitars and keyboards, both of which I played myself). This means that in situations where I wanted, say, a brass sound, I would use a setting on the keyboard and compose a melody myself. The problem with this is that the sound would be very synth-y and inauthentic, and I would say

that this synthetic brass was just a placeholder for the theoretical post-production track which would ideally use a live brass instrument instead. I didn't want to compromise the actual sound of my final project in this way, but at the same time reliably sourcing all of the live instruments plus musicians just wasn't possible, and so I made the decision early on to use samples and plugins. Therefore if I wanted a brass instrument I would find a sample of a live recording of a brass instrument rather than using my MIDI keyboard. I feel like this decision has improved the overall quality of my tracks compared with previous ones. The sound quality is more consistent and I have been able to focus on the mixing to achieve the desired sound, or as close as possible rather than spending a lot of my time recording and re-recording initial chords and melodies myself.

Whilst working on this project I paid a lot of attention to detail, which I think comes across on the final tracks. Rather than just composing music which fits the broad actions and feelings of the scenes, I added sound effects that sync with every small gesture and movement from the animation - both diegetic sounds such as scraping ice and screaming horses, and non-diegetic sound effects that playfully reflect a gesture or mood such as a tinkling bell-like sound for fluttering eye-lashes or a shrinking whistle to convey exhaustion. Just in the first thirty seconds of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (part 1), you have Mickey's footsteps, the echoey clunk of wooden buckets being placed down in the stone stairwell, the whistle of exhaustion, the sloshing of water and the grabbing of handles. I will say that on reflection the sloshing water could have been made to sound more natural - it is a little too rhythmic - however I was very pleased with most of the sound effects and successfully honed the skill of manipulating an existing sound into the sound I needed.

In my proposal I planned to collect audience feedback from three separate groups - one group who only watched the animation and audio simultaneously, another group who watched the animation and audio together, and then just listened to the audio alone, and a third group who just listened to the audio. This way I could get an idea of how well my composition worked as a score, whether or not the seeing the animation first affected the perception of the audio when listened to separately, and whether the score worked as a standalone tracks in their own right. I ended up just setting up groups 'one' and 'three' - the general consensus of 'group one' was that

the tracks were successful as a score for the animation. I was surprised that two people even made a point of commenting on the good use of sound effects. I feel that the rest of the sample didn't necessarily pick up on the details, but an audience doesn't tend to - the main thing is that all the details work together to create an experience that is satisfying and immersive, even if the audience is conscious of them. 'Group three', who just listened to the audio, did give very different feedback to group one. They in fact seemed to have a lot more to comment on. The general consensus was that the score did work as standalone tracks, but if you were listening to the tracks without knowing that it was meant to be synced to animation some sections would sound 'strange', 'confusing' or even 'jarring'. However on the whole the reception was actually more positive than the reception from group one, with more people complimenting the music itself, describing it as 'layered', 'psychedelic', 'interesting' and 'exciting' - it was praised for taking unexpected directions and at no point becoming 'boring', even if one or two of the tracks were 'a bit too long'.

I feel that this project was very successful and worthwhile due to how much I've learned from working on it. I feel like I have really come to understand the art of recording, and things to take into account such as noise, room space. I have learnt how to time stretch, and how to change the tempo mid song (which I did in The Centaur Scene). Previously I was setting the tempo to a certain rate at the beginning of a project and sticking to that speed, I've now learned how to say begin at 120bpm, go up to 150 and back to 120. I have learnt how to make a clean, tidy mix, and how to make it sound fuller using plugins. I'm also a lot more confident with using my DAW.

5.3 Improvements for the Future

Something I have discussed in section 4 is my need to develop mastering skills and hone my mixing skills.

In particular, I need to learn how to EQ better. I had to go out and find plugins like Ozone by Izotope (AI which listens to your track and automatically adds EQ and widens and compresses) - so that you can then go on to tweak it to your liking. This really helped me and was something I

had to learn how to use - but I would like to be able to get to a point where I can make the sound full without having to use an application.

6. Personal Development Plan for the Future

Objectives What do I want to become?	- Freelance composer for visual media - Freelance topline - Continue to build brand - Avamo - and continue to build online presence and fanbase and promote music	Obstacles	- Competition - it's a competitive industry - Money and time - I will need to maintain a balance between earning money to maintain current lifestyle and taking the time I need to further develop and hone skills, continue to build portfolio and pitch and network
Actions What do I have to do to achieve this?	- Research and apply for relevant jobs within the industry - Research contacts and create pitches - Network - Continue to make music	Review How did I do	- Industry related - TBC - Online brand related - this is something that is quite well established however has been a little neglected in

	- Continue to connect with people online - upload content relating to my music on socials e.g. snippets of tracks and 'behind the scenes' footage of making tracks etc.		recent month in favour of masters course - I will return to building my online brand alongside adding to my portfolio and attempting to make industry contacts
Criteria How will I know I've achieved this?	- When tracks start to get chosen for anything film or TV related - When I am offered paid gigs as a topline - When I'm offered a job in the industry and/or when income from freelance work doesn't look drastically different to my income from IT.	Start date	Ongoing
Resources What resources will I access?	- Home studio: having recently purchased new speakers and a new microphone I am now	End date	Ongoing

	almost 100% happy with my home studio set-up. The only thing that I could still do with is better instruments - for example if I am to play live instruments on my tracks going forward I am in need of a much better plugin bass guitar - Contact details for relevant people within the industry for example music supervisors and indie film makers - Access to industry news and job opportunities		
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7. Conclusion

This isn't something that I mentioned in my proposal as it wasn't specific to this project, but my ultimate goal from the beginning of my masters course was to become proficient enough at mixing and mastering to be able to create tracks that are a professional enough quality to stand up by themselves without the use of vocals. Generally speaking the feedback I receive for the music I make focuses on the quality of the vocals as the main point of praise - since I started making music this has been a recurring theme professionally, personally and academically, and

so I wanted to strip that element away so that I can judge how far I've come at honing my composition skills. I am happy with the quality of my tracks and I can discern a definite improvement in quality to the music I was creating a year ago.

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