

THE EMOTION BEHIND MUSIC COMPOSING

WITH LESLEY BARBER

Owen Shapiro 00:04

Welcome to Kino society with Owen Shapiro. Today on Kino society, we are joined by Lesley Barber, a film composer who writes music marked by intelligence and emotional depth. Her distinguished list of credits include longans, Oscar winning, you can count on me Jerry Rothwell's award winning documentary, how to change the world, and Kenneth longer gins multi award winning an Oscar nominated film, Manchester by the Sea, and many more. I'm excited to learn everything about sound composing, welcome to the show, Lesley,

Lesley Barber 00:40

thanks, so lovely to be here today.

Owen Shapiro 00:42

So before getting deep into your work as film composer, I would like to know how you got started in this business as being a composer during the years since you were a little kid, or his passion was developed over the years?

Lesley Barber 00:54

Well, I did start writing music at a pretty young age, you know, before I was a teenager, I guess. And it was a really keen interest of mine. And then I studied music in university, I had other interests too, but I studied music in university and I started working in the theatre community and the film making community and really realized that I had a real interest in film, film making and, and filmmakers. And the dialogue began quite naturally with various directors who were interested in having me score their work. And one thing led to another and I was asked to score some feature films and and realize that this was a really great world for me, because the whole collaboration between a filmmaker and a composer is this really unique experience. So extremely rewarding.

Owen Shapiro 01:55

What about your education? Do you have any anything in terms of?

Lesley Barber 01:59

Well, when I went to university to study music, I focused a lot on composing that was my main area of interest and Renaissance theory. And I also was very into computers and electronic music. And also, focus was my piano performance on the work of Bach and Chopin were real favorites of mine,

especially Bach and early music. So it was a pretty diverse arena of learning. And I really started to focus more and more on writing orchestral music, chamber music, and especially hybrid composition, right from the beginning that had elements of electronic beats all kinds of different things. And, of course, a live complement of orchestra or chamber music or what have you.

Owen Shapiro 03:00

So now let's focus on your work. I'm pretty sure not everyone understands what a film composer is, and how worn your role is, and every film, could you describe what a film composer executives?

Lesley Barber 03:12

That's it? That's a great question. Because even at customs when I'm going over the border, it's quite funny trying to explain to customs agent what I do sometimes, and you know, wonder if I'm a songwriter, if I choose the music for the film, or if I work with the person who writes the music for the film. But in fact, we do write the music that you hear in the background, everything but the songs pretty much and sometimes composers write the songs that you hear in films as well. But we what we do is we come on board, usually, at the script stage, a director will send us a script, or a producer will send us something to watch, you know, some rough version of the film, a rough edit of the film. And we'll start a dialogue with the director, or the filmmakers in general on the film, but usually, most often it's a close relationship with the director. And we talk about what kind of music The director is looking for in the film, usually in terms of emotional terms, rather than instrumental terms. So rather than say to us, you know, I hear drums and clarinet or, you know, banjo and programming, it's more like the this is the emotional terrain of the film. This is the story I'm trying to tell. This is what steak This is what the characters are longing for. This is the the tone and the pacing of the film. So we're looking at the pacing of the cut the tone of the story and looking for places where we can elevate the meaning of the story through music.

Owen Shapiro 04:49

So do you pick the music after watching the film?

Lesley Barber 04:56

Yeah. Again, that's a really super interesting question. And if you really depends on the project. And there's just various entry points where the composer gets involved. And, you know, one of the one of the best places to get involved is at the script stage, while the film is usually being shot or right before it's being shot, where the director has time to, to introduce the composer to the ideas of the film, the characters of the film, and of course, the story and the world that the film is set in. And at that point, you can get you can sometimes composers even have to visit set and and supervise some of the moments in of the score that are also filmed on screen. So for instance, in my score for late night, that was just released about a year ago. Emma Thompson plays a late night talk show host and she has a band. And so the theme for that late night talk show band had to be written at the script stage so that we could decide on what the band look like on set who those instrumentalists are going to be. And so I needed to write a number of cues so that they could be used on set during the shoot. And then of course, there's this next stage where a filmmaker has shot their film, and they've been thinking about music, but they reach out to the composer while they're editing. And that's a really fun time to get involved. And I guess when I think about that, I think about a film like Manchester by the Sea. And both

times to work with Kenny Lonergan, he was editing the film, I'd written some ideas, but then I could send him drafts of what I was thinking, and he could edit the film to those drafts. And we can begin a really interesting collaboration or conversation between picture and music and, and really look at what kind of instrumentation would best serve the story and just the general atmosphere of the film. And then there's, of course, the third, there's another stage that we often come into, which is right at the very end, and maybe they've been working with, you know, the directors worked with a composer hasn't quite jelled, or they've been thinking about music, but I've delayed the decision for various reasons. And that's where we come in right near the beginning. And we have like five or six weeks, sometimes as little as three weeks, four weeks to write the entire score. And I mean, I prefer to come in a lot earlier, but it can be really fun to come in at that late stage as well.

Owen Shapiro 07:42

Actually, speaking of Manchester by the Sea, we had a makeup artist for that movie already on the podcast from threads. He did mention that director was very hands on with

Lesley Barber 07:54

Yeah, Kenny wonderful to work with. He's He's just, he's great at helping you find your voice and find the right voice for this for the film. And he's also really great at at helping you be ambitious for ideas that aren't like the commonplace idea, the that something outside the box, so to speak. And I really enjoy working through with him, you know, ideas we really want to go for. And he's really, you know, I think on both films that we were able to make really bold choices. And yeah, he's just a wonderful director to work with.

Owen Shapiro 08:40

So I know you are specifically interested in modern electronic earning loops and effects. Are there any other kinds of composing that exist? And why do you like this one the best?

Lesley Barber 08:51

Well, I also write a lot of scores that are completely acoustic, as well or symphonic, there's a nice blend sometimes of electronic and acoustic and that you can have a lot of ambiences and atmospheres in your music that I almost think of like the weather of the music. And they're really great at sort of animating the distance between the audience and the character and the stories and the picture. In that they, they kind of find a lovely space between the sound design and, and the space. The space of the audience exists in. So quite often with scores. I do spend quite a bit of time on on that ambient atmospheric overlay of each piece of music score like Manchester by the Sea, it was all completely acoustic. But then another scores that I've done especially Recently, there has been an interesting mix of atmospheric programming and of course acoustic it's, it can be challenging for the composer because when you have live performers playing with your atmospheres and, and beats and all kinds of things, you you the preparation before the score needs to be done meticulously so that everything is in sync and lines up and works beautifully in the recording process.

Owen Shapiro 10:30

So regardless of some differences in the composing style, could you describe a typical day as a composer working through history.

Lesley Barber 10:40

I don't know if there's a typical day. But I think like a lot of composers, I have sort of play time edit time and delivery time. And depending on the process, and the kind of expanse of time I have and the limitations of time that I have. And I might spend a few, a few days or even a few weeks just playing around and finding the right idea. And then there's a time where I have to take these ideas and edit them either into beautiful pieces that are ready to present and share or edit them to picture. Because sometimes I'm getting picture in a rough edit stage. And then suddenly, a few days later, someone will send me the picture on it, it's it's different. And I have to fix the music to hit to hit the marks of the hits and the beats of the picture the way they were intended. And then there's the delivery of your ideas to the director and producers. And that may or may not include some live players during the demo stage. So My typical day, I really try to have a lot of fun in the morning. And then in the afternoon, I usually really try to focus in something one, one idea and just try to pull out the magic in it, and probably by the next day, you know, have something to deliver and share with whoever I'm working with.

Owen Shapiro 12:10

So you've worked on many kinds of films in the past many, many films in general. Are there any in particular, any types of movies that were more typical to compose or easier particularly to compose?

Lesley Barber 12:23

Oh, wow, that's a good question. I would say for me, it's a really emotional connection quite often to the material. And it's interesting, because some of the films I've been involved in, especially ones that are psychological thrillers or horrors, even in our harrowing territory, but those can be challenging. They're extremely, they can be really rewarding. And I don't mean challenging in terms of bringing technique to the table or meeting the requirements, I just mean, in terms of being in that place. You know, I'm sure that for everyone on a film like that, in that world, that, that it can kind of take you to some interesting places and creatively and emotionally. And yeah, I would say sometimes it can be challenging, especially in psychological horrors, because for your music to be really good. It's just really important to connect with all the points of view in a film as much as you can.

Owen Shapiro 13:27

Are there any other genres that have any other specific things that they have to utilize? In terms of music,

Lesley Barber 13:35

the time can be challenging, but sometimes it's also a resources sort of question as well, that can that can create a challenging situation, if you are working on a film with a lot of really epic exterior shots for, for instance, helicopter shots, drone shots, and you really want a huge, expansive orchestral sound, and maybe the resources aren't there and figuring out exactly how to fill up that same space. And, you know, sometimes I'll do that electronically. Sometimes I'll work with a kind of combination of orchestral strings and string samples or sometimes mixing some beautiful stacked vocals to create that lushness. So there's a lot of different ways to approach it each time and, and with every film for sure. There's always a challenge of your it's never the same as the last film.

Owen Shapiro 14:36

We worked on a Four Weddings and a Funeral.

Lesley Barber 14:40

Well, there was a series that was that was based on it that Mindy Keeling wrote that was that came out last last summer. So it was it was it was 10 one hours. Yeah. Yeah, no, it was an amazing film. Right.

Owen Shapiro 14:56

And first movie is a very fun Yeah. you've participated in many films and series and documentaries. So is composing a movie for documentary, your series made a difference.

Lesley Barber 15:11

Usually with the series, there's a number of people that that you're getting comments from within with an auteur driven film, you're really quite often just working with the director, which is great. Or maybe the director and the producer, with, with the series, as I just mentioned, quite often, there's a number of producers that want to hear your music, and then make comments. And so the scheduling is really tight and demands a lot of organization and teamwork. So it's really important to have a fabulous team, working with the composer. And then with documentaries is pretty, it's really fascinating how the story can shift and the point of view can shift. So right up until the point it's edited. So quite often, when I hear about the documentary, I haven't done that many, but the ones that I've worked on, I kind of look at the cast of characters, and I look at this story the same way I would as fiction, but quite often with with documentaries, because there's just such an abundance of interviews and footage involved quite often they can shift the story quite dramatically right up into the end. And, and also, there's usually a lot of music involved, underneath, voiceover and so on. So it's really interesting to sculpt the music and create themes in that world, when everything's moving, it's like the whole thing is a moving target, to some extent.

Owen Shapiro 16:52

So what are the challenges that you face as a composer and Petey mentioned overcome them, this can be inside your specific role, you're inside the film industry, in general,

Lesley Barber 17:02

I would say that over over the last few years. Protecting your creative space can be challenging, because a lot of the people you're working with are their job is to communicate with you and check in with you. And they could and they expect kind of very quick emails and very quick communication, which is great. But I mean, it's important for composer to also have a few hours where they can really sink into the music at hand and to bring the sensitivity to their music and the emotionality. That is why why we can listen to a piece of music 4000 times, you know, it's, you can think about pieces of music, I'm sure for yourself that are three to four minutes long, and you've listened to them over and over and over again. And it's usually because there's something really magical about that piece of music. So I would say that when I'm working on a job that I try to carve out really early mornings and get up before everyone else, or stay up really late at night, you know, just to find that time, but I would say that, that that's something that's, that's that's important to protect as a composer, that intimacy with the work and, and, and protecting yourself and your time, so that you're able to write the best music you can.

Owen Shapiro 18:35

So as you may or may not know, I'm currently doing an internship with a director and I hope to have a professional career in filming one day, oh, you have any advice for people like me who want to make it speak in film industry as composers or in general?

Lesley Barber 18:53

I would say maybe and I mentioned this to sometimes to people who are working with me or if I mentoring someone is that it's, it's important to focus on your own craft, of course and to look sideways at what your colleagues are doing and heroes are doing in your own field. But it's also really important to look at yourself as a as a whole filmmaker, you know, and to understand and to really see as many films as as one can and, and absorb the moments of cinema, cinematography, music, sound acting that thrill you and move you and take a second look at how those moments come together because I know working with the directors, with directors, it's really important to have that awareness and that encyclopedic interaction with the work of the past, you know, so that when they bring up different films or different performances that you have, that you have your own access to that to those ideas and and and to those touchstones that they're bringing up to you. So sort of a love of me, I love, you know, be a cinephile as well as a as, as, as the person that as well as the specific craft that you're undertaking, if that makes sense. So now

Owen Shapiro 20:27

that you build a steady, professional career in the film industry as a composer, what's next for you? Are there any projects coming up ahead

Lesley Barber 20:34

of you? Well, as you know, it's kind of a there's a bit of a COVID thing happening right now, which is slowing down. It's slow things down a little bit. But yeah, I have a working again with a director that I worked with a while ago, Stephanie Lange, who who directed irreplaceable, you. And then I have a couple of projects that are in early development that I'm coming into at an earlier stage. I'm really excited about those as well.

Owen Shapiro 21:01

So finally, where can my listeners find and connect with you?

Lesley Barber 21:05

Yeah, like, I have access through my website through my Facebook page through Insta through Twitter, all the usual all the usual places.

Owen Shapiro 21:17

That's all for today. Don't forget you can subscribe to Kenya's society on iTunes and Spotify.