How to create a wholly owned music source from scratch

AND THEREBY AVOID A POTENTIAL ROBOT UPRISING

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‘Elite performance is simply the ability to do the basics better than your competitors’

- Roger Gracie

Kill all humans

- Bender

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1 INTRODUCTION

You've just signed a composer to make 20 tracks for your production music library. Two or three of these tracks will perform well and perhaps be considered a 'hit'. The rest will either sit unused or slowly gather usages over a long period of time.

If only 4 tracks in a 20-song collection generate value, then 80% of the work the composer does is functionally useless. This would mean that you are fine with wasting 80% of the potential value of the product you are creating, owing to the profit gained from the remaining 10% of their output.

A music supervisor sits on the supply side of the economic system. On the demand side, supervisors for TV and film, edit-suites, directors; what is their chief concern? At the time of writing (October 2021) it is the creation of artificial intelligence algorithms to assist in finding single or small amounts of tracks from the massively over-saturated production music market.

So…Demand is now building robots to help cope with the oversaturation of Supply, 80% of which, Supply admits, is useless and generates minimal value for them or their clients.

So how do we unlock this extra potential, reduce waste, and avoid a potential robot uprising?

2 YOU

…are the music supervisor, music manager, content services manager, producer, Muso-in-chief, whatever job title you have been given. You are the hub between corporate, client and composer, and the person responsible for your company sound amazing.

Your target market for external licensing (your ultimate and only serious long-term goal) is saturated by a small conglomerate of international companies and wandering A&R cowboys. To compete, your company must create a method of music creation that is more cost-effective, agile, creative and that produces a more desirable product than those currently dominating the market.

The purpose of this guide is to explain how to produce and deliver this professionally produced, mixed and mastered music to that end. The purpose of this music is to generate income for the company via the sale and dissemination to media companies and consumers in both B2B and B2C environments.

The PM development cycle is ultimately a long-term game, where problems can become part of the development cycle on week 1 and the damage not noticed until week 50. For instance, choosing a sub-standard mastering studio can go unnoticed by inexperienced

supervisors for months, and the lack of engagement by the audience due to the lack of physically engaging music may not be felt in the lack of sales until many months after that.

However, the media industry you serve is prone to sudden shifts in taste, as are the boardroom and the edit suite. It is important to have a 'task force' on hand to deal short-term pitches and surprise client-requirements.

Concurrently, secure, exclusive producers following meticulously planned, long-term production objectives wherein they are a stakeholder of the final product by way of their successful copyright can be your strongest asset, perhaps above networking and contacts.

The value that you add to the company is that through you the company gains the ability to work with music in an agile environment.

3 BUILDING TO AGILITY

In terms of product usage, production music development has more in common with software development than it does with commercial music production.

That doesn't mean the rigidity and regularity of software development should be applied to the creative arts. You shouldn't put a composer on a sprint or assign them a Scrum master. However, you should remember the difference between creating a linear piece of art, and a non-linear piece of media.

Commercial music is created for a consumer; a listener who experiences a track linearly. A production music company does not create a product for a consumer, it creates a component for a product that will be used, non-linearly via editing, by another company making a product for a consumer. Put simply, your customer breaks up your product and uses it in a non-linear fashion via video editing, rather than listening to the track from start to finish as consumers do with Spotify. End-users do the same thing with software, there is no linear way to 'complete' Photoshop.

4 IDENTITY vs FRAMEWORK

The catalogue should have its own audio identity. If the catalogue is created for a brand, then its current audio-branding direction is an obvious starting point. But an identity is no substitute for an actual, technically sound, and data-driven creative framework. An 'identity' to a catalogue is a rigid set of colours, copywrites and copyrights. An actual creative framework is organic, and changes according to client demands, what talent is available, and what is feasible according to the budget. It is also dependant on the composer's ability to carry out their instructions.

The creative framework must start with the basic technological requirements. Modern composition requires at least a basic understanding of music technology. A composer's

workspace should be acoustically treated, and at the beginning of contract negotiation the supervisor should ask for a complete list of equipment, DAW, hardware, software, instruments, and capabilities. The supervisor should also understand what these things are and what is possible to create with them. These different elements should influence the cash-to-track ratio in the final offer.

If a music supervisor is listening to tracks with in-ear headphone plugged into a laptop, they are not a music supervisor they are a mark with a budget.

Along with also working in an acoustically treated environment, the supervisor must also work with a DAW like a composer. Tracks should be able to run tracks through software audio analysers and graphic EQs to identify and correct errors, noises, frequency equalisation or any number of issues that may arise. Professional speakers are essential, a sub-bass unit, and any other devices (flatscreen tv etc) with playback capability that the end-user may consume media on. A good mix should sound good on all of them.

The different technical requirements and specifications at various stages of the development life cycle, including post-production and delivery, will be covered later in this document. The importance of understanding the technical abilities and limitations of the composer before a contract is signed is paramount.

5 DATA IN A NON-DATA WORKPLACE

The creative framework is only as detailed as the supervisors understanding of consumer demand

This guide assumes that you already have either a library of music that is not wholly owned, or at least some kind of body of music that your company has used in commercial projects that can point to as objectively successful, from which you can take data and extrapolate KPI's.

This can then be crossed-referenced with lists of top-earning tracks in both the commercial and production music fields to give at least a cursory idea of what genres of music are suitable to invest in and develop.

If the company creating the library already has a history of media-music engagements, then creating KPI's to begin building a music catalogue can be informed by the commercial results of previous content in the marketplace.

Concentrate on the practical value of each engagement with the music, rather than simply the volume of engagements.

Any suggestions that can be gleaned from previous or current clients or internal stakeholders with questionnaires, focus groups or simple Q&A sessions can be vital.

Actionable suggestions should be broken down into long and short-term concerns, just as one would with software development.

As the library is released, feedback should continue as a routine. If a customer asks for one type of music once, and the solution doesn't come for another 8 months then the demand may not be there once production is completed. If across the board the tracks are considered too loud, mastering specifications can be changed quickly to affect any productions thereafter.

How KPI's are achieved is a matter of regularly testing and adapting the content created and cross-checking with clients and stakeholders of the project. This can present logistical and networking issues if the clients are not centralised creatively or perhaps tracks are sub-published to them via a larger music publisher and unable to acquire data or feedback.

If the company creating the library is brand new and has no previous data or engagements, then data analysis begins on the internet, buying into industry data hubs and analysing current trends. This can also simply be a case of looking at the UK top 40, US top 100, Spotify, iTunes, and trailers on YouTube (including the adverts!)

Supply and demand in the front-end of the media industry is not rocket science, and even a beginner can spend a week absorbing these different sets of aggregated content and come up with a semi-realistic A&R plan.

However, being able to recognise demand does not mean that one is able to recognise the skill required to create a product to fulfil that demand. One key issue that can come back to haunt companies in the long term is the use of sample packs in production music.

6 SAMPLE PACKS AND CMS

Use musicians who can play and record their own instruments, and barely, if at all, use sample packs.

Commercial sample packs are the equivalent of canned food. Useful at home when one is desperate, but not to be used in a professional restaurant. In the average PM supply chain, samples and sample packs are the raw material with which music is manufactured.

If the project hires experienced, professional composers with their own studio space or servers of high-end, one-shot (single hit or single note) samples, a MIDI device and compositional and instrumental expertise, then the project can avoid having to think about this issue.

Be sure to confirm the identity and validity of composers before they are hired. Some nefarious composers will offer pictures or a tour of their studio, then use commercial sample packs for the first demos to see if the client can tell the difference. Then, with the spare time they have created by using out-of-the-can samples, they can take on more projects.

Sample packs are an unfortunate reality of music composition. String orchestras, expensive synthesisers and mass percussion are still the sound of mainstream cinema, and therefore the sound of videos and media content made by people who aspire to make films.

Since the average production music composer is either working from home or in a small studio, the use of sample packs to create music that they are unable to create otherwise has become common.

Also common are multiple tracks using the same sample from the same sample pack. The first to hit YouTube CMS being registered as the copyright owner, and all other uses of that sample being blocked from the platform.

Hiring trained instrumentalists to create original music that is engaging to the audience and full of its own unique energy, will futureproof new music and allow companies to make a cast-iron guarantee to clients. And make sure that the company only works with musicians who are coachable and committed.

The only sample packs that should be allowed are drums and percussion, and those should be processed and adapted by the composer.

For anything else that is required, such as orchestras or niche instruments, find a composer with an advanced MIDI setup or real-time instrument, plus instrumental and compositional skills. If this not available, the project may wish to consider being less ambitious in its creative objectives and start with a simple approach just using what they have available.

7 PROJECT CREATION/BRIEFINGS

Projects can be anything from 2 tracks from various composers in a single release, 20 tracks from one composer for an up-front fee, a commissioned track for licensing that goes to the catalogue after a contracted lifespan, or any mixture of these legal and logistical concepts.

Maybe by breaking down the project into smaller groups of tracks and using more artists, a music supervisor can work around this. But this is not efficiency, this is transferring the bulk 80% of valueless effort from the composer to the supervisor.

Moreover, eliminating effort is not eliminating waste.

The key issue confronting a new library is managing the composers to the point where they fulfil the objectives set for them and still feel that they enjoy enough creative freedom to justify their time, and any perhaps pacify the notion they may have that they are not being paid enough.

As stated previously, this guide assumes that the company has a small budget and modest resources and needs to maximise efficiency, reduce costs, and find musical and technical solutions to increase the value of their product with the bare minimum extra expenditure.

We have already established that:

- The project must observe KPI's
- Output is constrained by the composer's abilities and equipment
- Commercial sample packs are bad
- The goal is to reduce waste and unlock extra potential
- Varying the size of projects is an option but does not reduce waste

And to this we can add another important cost and time-saving bullet-point

- Creative freedom is a useful and cost-saving bargaining chip.

The key variable tying these points together is time. If there is no set release schedule, the supervisor can always rely on the vastly different creative schedules of the composers. Some will take the whole contract time and delivery two or three tracks every month, some will disappear and come back with a full album in half a year. The project will default to a randomised release schedule.

If the project insist that all composers follow the same schedule, it may risk damaging the composer's preferred workflow or system of composition. The more rigid the time and work-management of the composers, the more effective (although admittedly unquantifiable) creativity could be lost.

The balance is between the KPIs, the prediction of which composer will finish first, which require the least supervision, and which will require the least work in post-production.

Once the first cycle is finished, all these questions about the composers will have been answered, and the project will be able to adjust KPI's and work to their strengths and expediencies accordingly.

Some can be left to simmer on the backburner, others can be thrown in a pan and cooked to perfection in a flash.

8 ARTIST ACQUISITION/CONTRACT NEGOTIATION

We have already established that having composers on exclusive contracts is an advantage because of the short turnaround times available for projects. The same could be said for composers that are contracted in the company's home city. Hiring international composers can be essential in countries with favourable currency exchanges, but why not take advantage of talent at the doorstep?

Negotiations with composers, managers and agents can be lengthy and frustrating. It is important to understand the values and deficiencies in the composers that are being hired, and what values and deficiencies the offer from the company has.

If the target is an experienced, disciplined, technically competent composer whose music they compose with energy, seriousness and integrity, the client will no doubt get what they paid for.

Here is a basic framework for separating and understanding the important economic variables of potential PM composers.

8.1 Technological Ability

Not to confused with '*technical'* ability. 'Technical' ability refers to the composer's ability to play their instrument. Technical ability is not such an important consideration, however 'technical competence' on at least one musical instrument certainly is.

Technological ability refers to the composer's ability to record, produce, mix, edit and any other task that calls for engagement with music tech equipment. Music tech is a scientific field, and qualified engineers should be treated with the same respect as software engineers, and not as implementation slaves. However, without the compositional flair behind it, they are simply an engineer.

Finding the right balance between these two fields that have, due to the inception of internet music, been artificially infused together, is key to finding a great composer. Conversely, there is nothing stopping a supervisor from hiring purely technical engineers to mix tracks, then hiring composers who only write tracks and do no actual mixing, so long as they follow a strict technical scheme devised by the composer.

This division of labour, when rigorously administered, can reduce costs, and lift composers from a tiresome technical burden, therefore lowering their value.

8.2 Compositional Ability

The compositional ability of the composer is measured the same way as anything else in the process, by the result. With three chords and six notes one can create a multi-million-dollar brand. Composers don't need to be Beethoven to generate usage and income, but if they are either untrained, young, or not technically competent to perform consistently enough, the key to harnessing what talent they do have is simplicity.

Asking someone with compositional flair but no technical training to create orchestral music will lose them, but simple, drums-bass-harmony-melody, structure geared towards editor retention, and a firm hand guiding away from complicated concepts can yield short-term results and long-term development.

8.3 Administrative Expediency

This is vitally important for a composer that the project is planning to work with full-time or exclusively. Even if they make the most amazing music in the exact timeframe specified, if they can't fill in the contract in time it can jeopardise the entire content supply chain.

As we have established earlier, a lot of information about the composer is required up-front to make sure they can perform to the standard required. This kind of specificity also acts as a filter to find composers who fail to respond quickly or don't prioritise communications.

8.4 Previous Clients

*This is the least important aspect of the composer's profile***.**

It is no guarantee of higher quality, just higher price. If you're serious about building your own brand, sound, identity, and library then take the bold step of supporting developing musicians. Establish a dialogue with them that can lead to a successful creative relationship and guide them to becoming better musicians who can make money for you and for themselves. There is no such thing as front-ending composer costs, and you don't need to bleed to attract sharks.

9 MUSIC SUPERVISION

The idea that 'anyone can make music' is fine for the commercial sector, who sell soap idols and child-stars to an audience of prospective soap-idols and child-stars. A production music supervisor must hire trained professionals, or hire amateurs and train them professionally, to create music so good that it, as we have already established, will prevent a robot uprising.

Descriptions of music in written A&R notes both internal and external should adhere to at least a basic, agreed musical nomenclature, and be written in specific, descriptive prose. Words such as 'vibes', and 'awesome' should be avoided. Personal taste and collective, office-based-confirmation bias is also not a good substitute for simply following an effect supply chain from start to finish. First affirm, at least to yourself but ideally to the entire organisation, the actual meaning of the descriptive language they use when they talk about music.

One can ask for tracks to be delivered at a certain volume, sample-rate, tempo, key, and formulate a near-objective tone-palette for each instrument based on pattern-recognition and metadata trends. But the glue that holds together the objective notions of media music, such as they are, and the wholly creative human side is the warmth, engagement, and energy of well-mixed, well-produced and energetically performed recording. Competently mixed, subtlety tweaked and expertly guided from a few buzzwords in an email, all the way to a potential soundtrack superhit.

There is no objectively correct answer for the issue of music supervision, just many things that the music supervisor can do incorrectly that are listed in this guide. A music supervisor should be capable of discerning groove from mess, real instruments from fake, spot poor edits, lazy samples, crummy playing, and listen to every scrap of audio with stamina, patience, and meticulousness.

Meticulousness, sadly, in this context means understanding not just the technical and creative, but also the lives and livelihoods of the musicians you are signing. Along with the other information in this guide, here are some of the things to try and spot in demo and final mixes from your composers.

9.1 R-B-H-M-X

Rhythm, Bass, Harmony, Melody, 'X'. Even if the track you received is an ambient drone with a distant trumpet melody, the track will still need these 5 elements.

'X' in his context does not refer to some sort of fictional 'X factor', it is simple reflection of the magic in music that can happen at any time. 'Miss Jackson' by Outkast has a melody, but the *'ooo'* between *'I'm sorry Ms Jackson'* and *'I am for real'* is the X in that track.

Are all those 5 elements present in the track? Is it just a rhythm section with no melody? Is there a harmony acting as a counterpoint, or is it just unison and colourless? Does the composer understand what these things are?

How do you know unless you ask them, and how do you know what to ask for? This 5-point outline is a good place to start, in the same way that a mechanic who has never driven a car before and ascertain whether a car has wheels, an engine and a steering wheel.

9.2 Sample-packs

Is there a main riff that the other tracks are based around, or is it a group of individual noises stuck together in a computer? Is it just a loop with a drum part, bass, and synth? Is there a vocal hook that sounds like it was cut from a sample?

As mentioned before, this can be a killer when the track is in use and gets to YouTube, or any platform with a half-decent CMS. This issue cannot be solved with a single question, it requires constant vigilance and curiosity about the music you are receiving. The excitement of a great hook, catchy musical gimmick or lucrative melodic hook should be tempered with questions as to their origin. If the composer has used additional session musicians on the project, the legal responsibility should be on the composer, not you to reimburse them.

9.3 B-material

Sometimes a demo of three or more songs can come in, each some sounds well-polished and within the same production framework, similar instrumentation, and creative concept…yet somehow it doesn't quite fit what you asked for. It may be that your composer is sending you 'B' material that was rejected by another company. As a composer, you can completely understand their need for quick turnaround, and making use of every scrap of music they make. You will end up treating your work the same way once you must make a lot of high-end content in a short amount of time. However, taking 'B' material from one client and passing it off to another is not the service that you are paying for, and should be questioned if spotted.

9.4 Brick-wall demos

'Brick Wall' is a type of mastering limiter, or a way of using a mastering limiter. The technological concept behind this is fascinating and useful to understand. Composers and studios can send you demos that have been run through a mastering limiter to make the track sound louder and more impressive than they actually iare.

Have you ever been to a local gig with a band on stage creating a huge wall of sound, only to put in a pair of ear plugs and realise that, under the noise, reverb, distortion, and delay, that the band can't actually play? That is the same trick that composers and studios rely on when they send a hastily constructed track, smashed into oblivion.

Beware of demos from composers who try this trick, always ask for the non-limited versions before the contract is signed.

9.5 Delivery Standards

Many, perhaps a majority, of the composers you work with will not have any experience with production music and not understand that editing down tracks into smaller and smaller versions of itself is a tedious and time-consuming process. It is your responsibility to ensure that the standards for edits and musical narrative don't slip, and that the final product is a self-contained musical kit, cut perfectly and ready to go into an edit.

10 MASTERING

Mastering can, of course, be handled simply by throwing money at a studio and catching music on the return. Canned food can also be consumed, as this guide has already established. It is better to have a dedicated professional tied to the project who will master or manage and supervise the mastering of each project individually, to maintain standards.

The mastering engineer should be treated exactly as that, an engineer. Engineers are supposed to point out potential problems and find objective ways to fix them using a scientific process. It the responsibility of management to pay attention to this objectivity and accept the conclusions.

The mastering engineer must set standards, a technical framework and feedback on demos and potential tracks that the supervisor is scouting. Knowing the technical limitations and skills of composers before they are signed is vitally important.

The issue of loudness and how loud the final volume of the mastered tracks is an issue that needs to be addressed before mastering takes place. The much maligned 'loudness wars' that began in the 2000's are a subject that can take up a lot of valuable time. Suffice it to say that the issue has a third player, that is the advertisers who use these tracks.

Production music is, as we have already established, not created for the end-user, it is created for a company that is making something for an end-user. The advertisers are one of the last links in the chain before the end user and have been canny enough to demand that their product is turned up much louder when the advert break begins.

Music for libraries, catalogues, productions, does not need to be loud. The various links in the chain before the end-user will ensure that it is as loud as is required. During this time, they do not wish to have to keep adjusting the volume level of the tracks as they work on it, so they need the mastered track to be compressed, limited and eq'd to perfection.

11 MASTERING SUPERVISION

The minimum amount of time a music supervisor can listen to a track from the beginning of the product lifecycle until the end is three times. Demo supervision, final mix supervision, mastering supervision. Listening to the tracks coming back from the mastering studio requires two frames of reference to 'A-B' with, the unmastered track and a mastered and released 'benchmark' track from an industry leader. Don't ask the mastering engineer to provide you with these industry standards, research your own independently.

The ultimate goal of post-production is to compartmentalise the process to the degree that the creative side maintain creative freedom.

12 DELIVERY ADMINISTRATION

The industry standard for audio delivery in production music is based around ease of use for the customer. Tracks are delivered as individual 'toolkits' rather than as a single track. Thirty second, sixty second, instrumental version etc.

The industry standard is to have the composers do this themselves, however for the sake of standards and uniformity it is better for either the supervisor or a different member of this team to handle the task.

Dedicated administration and tech are vital components of an agile music environment. A dedicated audio editor, whose job it is solely to cut up stings and 30-sec edits so that each one is a beautifully conceived 30 second musical narrative, is a vital part of competing with larger companies, who leave this job to the composer.

The short-term goal of this position is to create audio cuts and archive stems. However, a long-term objective of this position could be to embark on another cost-benefit exercise, to harness and exploit the massive number of stems for each individual track that comes into the archive.

This brings us to cannibalism.

13 ARCHIVE/SAMPLE LIBRARY/CANNIBALISM

A common mistake by almost all libraries is to only concentrate on exploiting the mastered product and fail to consider exploiting the massive library of stems that they have accumulated from their individual releases.

In much the same way that Stretch Armstrong was once just a bucket of corn syrup and a gleam in a young man's eye, so too can the assorted stems, samples and even demo versions of tracks be re-sampled, chopped, glitched and turn inside out and upside down, to become completely new content. It is possible for the layman to download an app that automatically stretches tracks by 800% and creates instant Brian Eno-style ambient music. The only arbiter of what is new is the CMS, not the client.

Cannibalising pre-existing audio is a crucial tool in the development of fledgling, low-funded libraries. If the project cannot afford a composer, a remix artist will do just as well. They can work without a share of the copyright, and, since they are not creating content, just re-arranging it, they cost less.

We have already established that the robot uprising will being with music AI's, and that one reason for this is the excess of supply over demand. So, retaining the services of an archivist who can edit and instruct other editors and remixers can lead to refreshing and remaking of tracks, and the creation of new material and cheaper prices, instead of the catalogue simply lying dormant.

14 COMPOSER DEVELOPMENT/RETENTION

As the first round of the product lifecycle draws to a close, re-signing and re-negotiating with composers can begin. Even if a composer is signed non-exclusively it is important to

listen to their early demos compared to their first masters and target areas of their work for improvement and building future projects to their now apparent strengths. If a composer is signed to an exclusive deal, it is the responsibility of the company to pitch the composer to external projects, and aggressively pitch their music as widely as possible.

The company can have a worthwhile logo to have on a website, a generous up-front fee, and additional product perks, but if the company cannot deliver long-term results from the use of the music that the composers create, the supply chain has failed and so too has the company's relationship with the composer.

Composer (and perhaps employee) retention and development goes as far as the catalogues' will to succeed.

15 CONCLUSION

There is no magic bullet or secret technique to creating, executing, and improving the processes that make up the PM content supply chain from start to finish. However, the industry is young, comparatively small, niche and almost exclusively centralised. Therefore, the processes and methods for industrial fabrication are likewise new and ripe for analysis and improvement. Moreover, the centralisation of any industry will historically lead to short term financial gain at the expense of long-term technological innovation.

In agile environments innovation is iterative, regularly tested, and responsibility shared rather than wielded. The failure to adequately respond to the obvious flaw in the basic economic building blocks of the industry standard workflow show clearly a 'waterfall' style of management that has failed to evoke neither innovation nor efficiency.

This document will serve to promote a more efficient, agile, and innovative way of establishing and continuing a production music library in the future music industry, which, God willing, will not be administered by cruel, un-feeling robot overlords.

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