



Composing in MIDI

Capturing the Notes

Dennis

Clearly when you're composing to some sort of visual material timing must be very important so do you start with the music or do you start with the time, how does it work?

Simon

It comes down to a compromise again between two poles if you like, first of all there is a length of scene and there is a pace of a scene also the way it's edited. So you have to look at that to start with, I think, without writing any music at all. But, at the other end of it we expect music to come in understandable packages, usually four, eight to sixteen bar chunks and so if we are writing with a picture which hasn't been cut in four or eight or sixteen bar chunks, we may have to slightly jiggle between getting a nice flowing piece of music and getting the picture, the hit points as we call them, to come in the right points within the music.

This is a cue with the same musical content but it comes earlier in the film. And it's in four bar chunks. I'll just play you one of those four bar chunks. Two, three, four, two three four. And that's where we'd expect something to happen but as you can see in the picture nothing yet is occurring so I'll play you from the same place and you'll see that I had to add an extra bar which does in fact increase the tension and works nicely to release when, when you see the action happen. Here we go. Each four bar phrase something is occurring musically which, with those pictures is fine but we wanted the take off there to be in a, in a good position so I had to add that extra bar.

Generally speaking I will watch a scene and find a pulse that sort of works throughout the piece. And if I can write melodies that last four bars long / and then move on to the next idea I find that it's an easier way for the, for the viewer to if you like ignore the music but let the music do it's job. If the music goes exactly with the picture that's called Mickey-mousing usually where it follows exactly everything that the picture does. The music's very then intrusive, we're not able to ignore it because it's always catching us off guard I suppose. So it's a balance between getting the right overall speed and also a right musical structure to work with the pictures.

Dennis

So in the end do you perhaps have to do some very fine-tuning to the timing or to get it exactly right?

Simon

The beauty of working with primarily midi to start with is that you can keep adjusting all the time I can cut up chunks of music and copy it I can speed up or slow down I can even have elements of the music which are in the first four bars and then not in the next four bars and then come back in the, in the subsequent four bars. So I can always change what's around. What I try to avoid doing is having 5/4 bars going into 3/4 going into 6/8 bars so that you're never sure where the beat is.

Dennis

We've decided on a mood and you've perhaps got a tune in mind so how do you actually get the notes into the computer or how do you start the composing process from there on?

Simon

I use various methods. I was trained in music in the classical sense so sometimes especially at the beginning of a project when I want to generate themes, I will work in the time honoured

way of playing on the piano writing down onto paper in a sketch book and deciding on how the music's going to work, to get a general theme.

But once I've got thematic material if I were to approach a subject in a film where I'm using linked themes obviously I know what the tune is then, and then I will probably put my hands straight on a keyboard and record in real time straight into the computer. One of the great things about midi is it's a sort of democratising of music.

The skill that you need to make music is not necessarily in real time any more. There are various ways of putting notes onto a computer programme. If I double click on this violin part it will come up as music first of all, which as a trained musician is quite a useful display for me, but there are other ways to look at the information. This is a representation of where the position of the beginning of the note is, what it is, what channel it's on, what note it is and what the value of the velocity is and how long it lasts. But a very useful one which I use a lot is the matrix edit or piano roll this is effectively the punched paper and these are the holes. The most important things about the piano roll is we can see the duration of all the notes, how long they last, there's an overlap here. When I highlight those two notes these two notes over here flash but they're overlapping and it doesn't show up in normal music notation.

The other thing I can also see is what velocity it is by the colour. So a quiet note is blue but if I turn it up to the red it becomes much louder. And that's something again which is very easy to spot when working on the piano roll.

Now if I just play from bar eight we can see the cursor, reading the information. There are various ways I can put notes onto the computer programme.

One is to play them in which you've seen me do.

The other way is I can drag notes or write notes into the manuscript. But also I can do the same process over here into the piano roll.

Dennis

What happens if you have live musicians does that create it's own problems?

Simon

If I use live musician then I will notate what they need to play but they'll come in at the very last stage when I want to finish that piece of music off. So lets say I've got basically a midi orchestra but I want a live flute I will prepare a flute part, which a normal orchestral flute player will come and read and they will expect to see that, obviously, primarily in notation although there are people in the session musician world who will work from more vague material than that if the programme requires it.

Dennis

And it's easy to produce notational scores from the music you put into the computer?

Simon

Yes, although the big problem is always that what it looks like on the page for a musician to play doesn't necessarily mean that the computer is gonna understand in that way and produce it in that way so it does need quite a lot of human intervention.