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Mock-Up, Mic Up, Mix Up: The Impact of Technology on Orchestrators and Orchestration in the Contemporary Film Industry

Technology has always played a key role in the creation and production of film scores, from early experiments with synchronisation, through developments in recording, to digital editing, composing and mixing. The rapid rate of technological change since the widespread analogue-to-digital switchover in the 1990s has had significant impacts on a broad range of personnel working in film scoring, not least of whom is the orchestrator. The development of electronic demos has meant that directors now hear composers' fully-formed musical ideas, and when a cue is 'signed off' it is more than just the notes that are approved. Directors, and to some extent composers, expect what is heard at recording sessions to sound like the demos, raising questions regarding the role, value and place of orchestrators in the process.

This paper draws on interview testimony from professional film-score orchestrators and composers based in the UK and US, to evaluate the way developments in audio and visual technologies have impacted on orchestrators and orchestration in contemporary filmmaking. Consideration will be given to the materials orchestrators receive from composers, 'digitally native' practices such as MIDI transcription, and the changing skillset required by orchestrators, as well as the relationship between orchestrators and copyists, and the role played by the film itself. Finally, the paper will offer some tentative thoughts on the direction of film-score orchestration, and some considerations for the future of the profession, and the craft.