*The art of manipulation is a subtle one. It was an art explored in Nainita Desai's Soundology: a practical class in composing for factual film called "Perfect Harmony: Composed Music Scores for Docs" at Sheffield Doc/Fest 2014.*

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# TRANSLATING REALITY: THE EMOTIONAL SOUNDSCAPE OF DOCUMENTARY

A prolific composer and expert in sonic branding, Desai discussed the craft of manipulating the truth through music to create drama. Using case studies from her own extensive portfolio of documentary film and television work to show how music makes a difference in every stage of production, Desai talked her audience through the composer's role, from development to green lighting to post-production.

As a child, Desai was musically inclined (and multi-talented), studying the sitar, piano, guitar, tabla and violin. As a young woman, she obtained a degree in Maths at university – perhaps a logical extension of her predilection for precision, patterns and numbers. However, the adult Desai ended up pursuing a creative career, going on to study music technology and later attending the National Film and Television School where she first forayed into the fields of sound design and musical engineering. After film school, Desai worked as a sound designer, collaborating with directors such as Werner Herzog and Bernardo Bertolucci, great film auteurs that formed her creative foundation.

She also did a stint at Peter Gabriel's Real World Studios where she met session bass player Malcolm Laws. Two individuals with creative ambitions – namely the dream to write music for visuals – the pair formed Soundology twenty years ago. Together, they have worked on hundreds of projects, from award-winning documentary films to factual television dramas and everything in between.

The function of music is to help tell the story, says Desai. In the world of factual film, raw reported footage may shed light on events that have taken place. But it is often the music that shades in the emotional detail. In HBO's award-winning *Children of Beslan* (dir. Ewa Ewart and Leslie Woodhead, 2005), harrowing images of children, graveyards and weeping grandparents tell of the three-day siege that saw more than a thousand Russian children starved and held hostage, and hundreds more murdered. However, it is Desai's score that brings the film alive, her haunting strings conjuring an eerie sense of foreboding while somehow managing to capture an innocence stolen from the children in question.

Desai talks about how music shapes a film's narrative, gently guiding the viewer's emotions. However, in order to elicit the intended emotional response, the director and composer must speak a similar language. Desai's advice for fledgling directors who aren't quite sure how to describe the kind of music they envision for their films is to know how you want your audience to feel, and discuss this as you would discuss these ideas to your film editor. Discuss the music in terms of the narrative of the scene, factoring in energy, movement and emotion. It is the composer's job to translate and communicate the film's message, something at which Desai has gotten very good. Her score for *The Day Kennedy Died* (Leslie Woodhead, 2014) is subtle and restrained, glossy and American, chilling, authoritative, intelligent. It sounds like – and indeed, it is – a tense political thriller. "I tend to write about 87-88 minutes of music in a 90-minute film for Woodhead – wall-to-wall music – very much crafted around dialogue", she says. The film went on to be nominated for Best Single Doc BAFTA and an RTS Nomination for Best Music.

### As a composer you don't want to do a pastiche

Of course, there are challenges that every composer faces. Desai not only warns of the creative challenges of perfecting pacing and flow, but the practical challenges of budget and scheduling. One good way to deal with these issues, she says, is to leave ample time to experiment, not to leave everything until the edit. Advising creatives to allow themselves to explore various options might not seem like revolutionary advice, but Desai's commitment to experimenting is something that sets her apart from her peers. As part of her masterclass, she shared three different versions of a theme she wrote for Channel 4's *Jon Barrowman's Pet Hospital* (2014). "It's basic psychology", she says. If you give a director a choice, they'll choose.

The bouncy, playful music that Desai wrote for *Jon Barrowman's Pet Hospital* is a style of music that features in many observational documentaries (affectionately nicknamed 'ob-docs' by Desai). She calls this "plinky-plonky syndrome", citing Channel 4's *My Baggy Body* (2014) as a key example of the genre. However, Desai is not dismissive of recurring musical trends and tropes. Rather, she sagely advises composers to consider what commissioning editors might expect, and more importantly, what the audience might expect.

She warns of "temp love – an evil, vicious disease that occurs when the director falls in love with the temp track." Temp tracks – as in both temporary and template – are useful when trying to recreate an impression. Desai suggests composers try their hand at creating their own temp music, using films with a similar demographic as a guide. However, as a composer "you don't want to do a pastiche", so it's important to adapt rather than parody, both for copyright reasons, and for the sake of the film. She recalls being asked to lift from Hans Zimmer's score for *The Da Vinci Code* (Ron Howard, 2006) to use as a temp track for the opening sequence of *David Suchet on the Orient Express* (Chris Malone, 2010). All lush, green rolling hills and majestic aerial shots, it's easy to understand why Desai drew inspiration from Zimmer's "understated epic" of a score. >





Sometimes though understated isn't on the menu. Occasionally, Desai is asked to write wall-to-wall music, music that changes every 15 seconds. A typical sixty-minute documentary will contain 30-45 music cues. For one series, she wrote a bespoke library of over 130 themes, plus variations. Each episode had over a hundred adapted music cues,three times that of the average doc.

For this particular project, the senses are bombarded by the sheer amount of music and sound effects as well as breathlessly fast cutting and an assault of different images. It's not a matter of taste, but rather about the individual needs of a film.

Desai's parting wisdom was to never forget that composing is collaboration. "Your job is not to serve your own ego. Teamwork is absolutely crucial because your ultimate goal is to serve the film. As an artist, a musician, a creative, you have to put your own musical ego aside because you're doing what you can to serve the director's vision." _

## Q&A

**Filmmaking is all about collaboration. In Soundology you work with a partner. What is it like to co-compose something?**

Being a TV or film composer can be very isolating. What's great about having someone else to work with on a daily basis is that we feed ideas off each other. It's also a faster process working with someone. Not because there's physically two of us but because of the editorial process. Yes, I'm very much a conceptualist and an instigator when it comes to ideas and Malcolm Laws is very good at being able to translate what I'm describing with a musical instrument. Very often, I will sit down and write the basic ideas, and sketch things out structurally, and then he'll come in and we'll start adding layers and improvising and experimenting.

**To translate the director's vision is a very difficult thing to do. You have to turn something abstract, that doesn't exist yet, into something that's real and tangible.**

You have to be a bit of a mind reader and a psychologist! I always say to filmmakers, "Don't speak in terms of music… Speak to me on an emotional level, speak of the tone and the pacing, and the way it's been edited." My job is to try and translate that into musical terms, whether it be a big beautiful sweeping orchestral piece of music or something intimate and delicate. And the same thing goes for the musical palette. I try and create a unique identity for the film with the music just as much as the director is shaping the film with its own visual voice.

**In terms of relating those ideas in the initial discussions with a director, how do you go about developing that sort of language as a composer?**

One of the very common ways of working now, especially with scheduling pressures and deadlines, is to use temp tracks in the edit, inspired by existing music, whether that be soundtracks, library music or even the composer's own back catalogue. It's a visceral, instant way to communicate ideas to the composer.

**Because you've worked on so many different types of projects, your back catalogue is extremely diverse. Do you feel like you've been able to maintain a consistent style that draws collaborators and clients to work with you again and again?**

I've actually tried very hard over the last 20 years to be as diverse as possible, because what can happen very easily is that people like to put you into a box, that all you can do is a particular style of music. But despite the wide variety of music that I can write, I still have an inner musical voice that comes out. Many composers tend to specialise in a certain area. Of course, I have specialised – my career has channeled towards largely working in the documentary field which is huge. I'm very fortunate in that I have been able to straddle all these different worlds.

**What is it about documentary that you're drawn to?**

As much as I love all aspects of storytelling in narrative, fiction, nonfiction, what I love about documentary is that for me it really is true real life drama. And so it's great to be involved in projects that are very often worthy, important stories that need to be told and brought to a wider audience. Creatively, I find that very stimulating.

**What do you think is the difference between writing music for a documentary as opposed to writing music for a fiction feature?**

There isn't too much of a difference because I approach it in the same way. I approach drama and documentary in a very thematic way. You have to create a coherent voice for the character and the film, whether that be drama or documentary. The beauty of documentary is that quite often I'm writing for a series, not just a one-off film, so there is a longer period of time in which to develop a broad musical language and create a strong identity for that series.

**Can I ask you to sum up a couple of career highlights over the past 20 years?**

A project that really stood out for me was *9/11: The Day that Changed the World* directed by Leslie Woodhead because, although I'd been working with him for quite a few years on various projects, it was a culmination of what I'd been working towards. It was nominated for a BAFTA and I found the experience very liberating because it developed a trust between director and composer. He gave me total creative freedom, which in a way can be quite scary. When you're suddenly given an open book and you can write whatever you want, that can be more daunting than being given a rigid brief from the filmmaker.

The very first project that I did was the Lonely Planet travel series for Channel 4 in 1995, and that was very memorable for me because it was the first proper film that I scored. It was very much a baptism by fire because I'd never done it before, and it was an incredible learning process – learning how to write to picture, take a scene and craft music around the it, etc.

**What's next for you?**

I've just finished a batch of projects for BBC, ITV, C4 and C5 which have been very exhausting. I'm just finishing off the last week of *The Mekong* with Sue Perkins for BBC2. I just finished *The Day They Dropped the Bomb*, again with Leslie Woodhead, which won't be shown on ITV and Smithsonian until summer 2015. Last week, I just finished a beautifully crafted documentary for ITV called *Executed* to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the death penalty in Britain. And I'm just starting two three-part series for the BBC, *People of the Seas* (about the islands of the Pacific) and another called *Living With Nomads* which is being filmed in Siberia, Mongolia and East Africa.

**Do you usually work on so many projects at once?**

Yes, I find it keeps me on my toes creatively. If I only wrote in one musical style, I would feel very stagnant, and end up repeating myself all the time. What I love is going from one project to another constantly. Because they're all so different there's no fear of overlap. I'm a workaholic in that respect. _





**CHILDREN OF BESLAN**
Directed by Ewa Ewart, Leslie Woodhead
UK, 2005, 60 minutes

**THE DAY KENNEDY DIED**
Directed by Lorraine McKechnie, USA, 2013

**9/11: DAY THAT CHANGED THE WORLD**
Directed by Leslie Woodhead, UK, 2011, 94 minutes

**JOHN BARROWMAN'S PET HOSPITAL**
UK, 30 x 15 minutes

**THE DA VINCI CODE**
Directed by Ron Howard
USA, Malta, France, UK, 2006, 149 minutes

**DAVID SUCHET ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS**
Directed by Chris Malone , UK, 2010, 60 minutes

**THE DAY THEY DROPPED THE BOMB**
Directed by Leslie Woodhead, UK, 2015, 46 minutes