

My career

Composer

Patrick Morganelli

Los Angeles, California

BLS fast facts: Music directors and composers

- May 2011 wage and salary employment: 25,290
- 2010–20 projection: 10 percent growth (about as fast as average)
- May 2011 median annual wage: \$47,410
- Typical education and training: Bachelor's degree
- May 2011 top employing industries: Elementary and secondary schools, religious organizations, and performing arts companies. Composers are often self-employed.

What do you do?

I work as a composer in the movie industry, creating music that supports a film's story. Other composers work on television shows, and some do both television and film. The composer uses music to tell the audience what kind of movie it is and to help convey what the actors are expressing. The music can vary, depending on the emotion in each scene. I study each project and decide where music will be most effective.

When I begin working on a project, I meet with the director to “spot” the picture. We go through every scene and decide the precise start and end times for each piece of music. Then I create a list of all the pieces of music that I'll need to write and begin to write the pieces, but not necessarily in order. For instance, I normally write the main titles, which are at the beginning of the picture, last. That's because the main titles are the one opportunity for the composer to make a musical statement that's unobstructed by dialogue and to set the tone of the picture.

While I'm writing the music, the director comes to the studio for “show and tells,”

where I play a digital mockup of the music with the picture. I do about 10 minutes of the picture at a time so the director can give me feedback about whether I'm going in the right direction with the music. All in all, it takes me about 6 to 8 weeks to score (compose the music for) a feature film.

Describe a typical project.

When I do live recordings of music for a project, I write sheet music for each instrument, rent a studio, record the pieces, then edit and mix the tracks. I may also hire a music contractor, who finds musicians based on the number and type of instruments needed. The contractor also manages the recording session.

After the music is recorded, I send it to the production company along with a list of the precise locations where the music needs to be put into the picture. The quality of music is always best when it's recorded live. But sometimes, for financial reasons, we decide to record the music digitally instead. If this is the case, I prepare and digitally mix the tracks myself.

Do you compose music outside of film projects?

If I'm not working on a project, I try to sit down and compose something every day, even if it's something small. Creativity is a muscle that needs to be exercised. It helps when I actually have a gig so that I don't panic staring at a blank page.

Networking and making cold calls are also something I do on a daily basis. I look in trade magazines for projects for which I'm a good fit, and I contact the director or producer. I've gotten some good jobs this way and met many people, some of whom have become good friends and have referred me to others. I can't overstate the importance of developing a professional contact list.

What is your educational background?

I've played the piano since I was a kid, and I have an undergraduate degree in music. I also have a master's degree in classical piano performance and a postgraduate certificate in scoring for music and television.

What was your first job out of college?

I worked as a professional pianist for a year or so. It wasn't quite what I had imagined it would be when I had dreamed of being a musician. The work was incredibly hard, I had to deal with really difficult people, and the pay was not good.

When the reality of being a musician wasn't what I'd expected, I decided to join the Navy. My dad had been a military pilot, and the only other thing I had wanted to do other than be a musician was fly military airplanes.

So you decided to change career paths?

Yes, but it wasn't easy. Musicians aren't often accepted into the Navy, and I was rejected twice. The recruiters thought I would give up, but I got a personal recommendation from the captain of Navy recruiting in Los Angeles.

I was assigned to the F-14 Tomcat fighter jet. I was selected to be sent to Top Gun, which trains you to be a tactics instructor for your squadron. Then I spent the next 14 years in the Navy as a flight instructor, working all over the country.

How did your Navy career lead to getting your current job?

While doing my last tour with the Navy at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., I had become friends with some professional strings players. I had a few opportunities to play some chamber music with them. They encouraged me to pursue music professionally.

After I left the Navy, I met a local film director. He learned that I had been a musician and asked if I wanted to write the score for his




latest film. I jumped at the chance to give it a try. I really had no idea what I was doing, but it seemed to go OK.

I got a few other offers to score short films and such. I thought, if I'm going to do this professionally, then I need more education. I need to learn how this is really done. That's when I decided to go back to school to get my master's.

What's your best advice for aspiring composers?

There is no minimum education and no particular career path to become a composer. Spend a lot of time studying the art of composition. You need to have a firm grasp of the technical stuff.

I make a concerted effort to keep up with the technological changes in the industry. I read a lot of magazines and music websites online. I also spend a lot of time exchanging ideas with my colleagues and peers and hearing what they're doing.

Also, it doesn't hurt to plan for a day job. In the arts, there's a lot of intense competition, and it can take years before you make enough money to support yourself. Be realistic! 

Patrick Morganelli was interviewed by Sara Royster, an economist in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS. She can be reached at (202) 691-5645 or at royster.sara@bls.gov.

