

MASTER CLASSES

By **PATRICE RUSHEN**

Music Direction Clinic



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MUSIC DIRECTION CLINIC

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Question: Exactly what is that a Music Director does for TV Shows?

The Music Director is responsible for the preparation and execution of all music needed for the production. This can include production numbers, medleys, music for film clips, playons, playoffs of special guests or presenters, sometimes opening and closing themes, bumpers, fillers, music played during commercial breaks , music to accompany an artist's performance.

Question: Exactly what is that a Music Director does for a Touring Act of a talented "star " who is going on the road? Help in selecting band personnel, auditions. Sometimes organizing rehearsal schedules Working closely with production staff concerning music equipment, stage diagrams, helping artist individually learn material Working and having dialogs with additional musicians ie: orchestra or choir etc...

Steps: Producers; whether TV or record producers or artist's managers, usually have a "vision". This vision, first needs to be broken down into what its elements truly are. There are times when the scope of the vision seems to exceed the time to execute it in, or the money that's being made available to do it, or both.

In TV particularly, no one likes to hear the word 'NO". So the professionals who are called in to pull off the "vision" are usually highly skilled, able to follow through, figure out a realistic and workable methodology, and meet a deadline ... and oh yeah, on a budget.

An unfortunate truth about music is that since nearly everyone listens to it or at least hears some kind of music regularly; they think they know all about it. Rarely, however do we meet non musicians (however talented they may be in other areas) who fully understand how music is put together. A band or orchestra can't play a new Alicia Keyes arrangement for an orchestra without someone having to write the arrangement and then copy and print parts. It would probably be a good idea for the accompanying ensemble to read through said arrangement at least once before it's played to accompany Alicia. And, by the way, does she know the arrangement herself? Would it not be wise for the artist to go thru the material several times before the show? Sometimes, that kind of time and planning is in place and sometimes it isn't. Yet, it's the MD's job to make it happen and in my opinion to protect the integrity of an artist's performance. Sometimes this means having to be the translator. Decoding and interpreting the producer, director, TV execs and network requirements, while finding expeditious, and effective ways of musically delivering their "vision." This is the job of the music director.

Sometimes your opinion is welcomed, and sometimes not. Sometimes the realities involved in the success of the TV performance for a major show like the Grammys or Emmy Awards or BET AWARDS) greatly depends on the respect that the MD has with the performing artists in general. This level of “respect” usually comes from proven competency, creative critical thinking, a rolodex of great players and staff ...and the ability to pull it together quickly.

Aside from the obvious, organizational skills and the ability to “break down” the requirements of the BIG PROJECT into steps and smaller pieces effectively, is the confidence and trust that the music director has in the musicians who work for her/him.

Players, and singers who have a wide range of abilities, but who are especially adapt at understanding and conceptualizing stylistic nuances easily and on command.

If, for example, a production piece or playon has a particular groove, or is from a certain style or era, the musicians need to be able to grasp that concept quickly. They must be able to adjust for the “style” of the pieces to be performed. It could be anything from a quick playon or playoff, to the theme from a TV show, to a full-blown performance of a song.

The Music Direction is just that, direction. And the players involved must be versatile and adaptable.

What is the “skill set” of most successful Music Directors?

- organization and preparation
- ability to listen and then work out the specifics of what will be required
- adaptable , calm and sensitive to the limitations of others when it comes to really understanding music and what will take to successfully meet their musical requests.
- Good rehearsal technique (as there is always limited time...got to get through x amount of music) ... working out a game plan.
- Patience and good communication skills. Knowing how to decipher what someone might say and de code to what they really mean.

• Able to make changes at the last minute

Add'l skills:

- ability to arrange or rearrange on the spot
- some knowledge about tv production, camera and script terminology
- some conducting knowledge

- keen sense of versatility w/ styles
- know how to figure out timings when given so many min of music...how many bars is that? (explain in more detail here) For example: Start with how much time you're being given. Tempo of the tune . How many bars at that tempo can you play within the limited time. Work out edits .. That make sense and are themselves musical.
- How to sound check effectively and quickly
- How to play or conduct or both with headphones when director/producer also in your ears. (explain)

I cannot over-emphasise however, the importance of the MD's ability to cast the right players/singers for the job at hand. Someone who is really funky, but who it takes a long time to learn form and decipher a chart could be disastrous in a situation like TV. That same person , however might be perfect for an extended live tour where there were significantly more rehearsals and the material already existed on a recording that they could study and memorize.

A great singer does not a great background-vocalist make.

Learning the material, steps and movement, understanding how to “blend” with the other voices, keeping oneself healthy

and looking good on stage...all are a part of what a Music Director has to consider. Sometimes, the artist or the Producer has his or her own ideas about who should or shouldn't have the job.

All in all ...my feeling is that the Music Director helps to direct traffic. The organization and musical “point of view” of a show or a project has to be understood and implemented with accuracy, consistency, skill and spirit. It is my feeling that this kind of energy, drive and feeling starts with a confident and capable music director. Balancing and challenging the sometimes perceived “task master” mode with an ability to empower all involved to focus and give their very best in any given musical situation. Although it is unrealistic to think that everyone involved in a production – notices when all the music is played well and everything is flowing “just right”, I like to think that it makes a difference when you can feel that the MD really cared about the project (and not all MD's do. It's for some, another job, another check , another show.) But.... the music done well, always makes a show that much better... 'cause the choices are right. It feels great and sounds great.

— Patrice Rushen

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