

Soundtracks **How Hollywood is scored**



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Whether using a live orchestra six thousand miles away, or doing it completely by digital means, film soundtrack composers are bringing new meaning to the term virtual reality. Christopher Gillett reports on an industry struggling to balance Hollywood's competing concerns.

'I want a hundred-voice Russian choir and a full orchestra!'

'Fine,' says Joel Douek. 'Get me \$500 per player, and we can talk.'

Music for a film is always the last piece of the creative puzzle, and even though the budget may have run dry, it's not unusual for the director to say he wants a big score. But orchestras are expensive, and in union towns like LA, players are entitled to a cut of the post-cinema profits on top of their session fees – a cost that dissuades many producers from recording there.

Douek is a film composer – one of hundreds living in Los Angeles. He's not a household name, perhaps, but he does have many big projects to his credit. In recent years he has scored mystery film *The Tall Man* and David Attenborough's IMAX documentary *Galapagos 3D* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oy3T5oAw888>). While we look at the view of LA from his house in the Hollywood Hills, Douek explains the film music business to me.



Opening
Joel Douek

● The Tall Man (Original Moti...

It's facing a crisis. An increasing number of scores are being recorded in Eastern Europe because of cheaper prices, and in London, where 'buy-outs' are now also possible. Depending on what the producer can afford, Douek will offer three options: a full orchestral score, a fully digital score that sounds very

much like an orchestra, or a hybrid of the two – a digital orchestra with some real solo instruments added on top.

Whether he's composing for a digital or live orchestra, Douek writes on a computer, synchronising his composition with the movie as it plays on a large screen above his desk. For a live orchestra recording, parts are arranged and wired to, say, Prague. Before dawn on recording day, Douek and his team assemble in his Hollywood Hills studio.

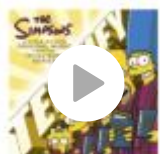
Family Guy Scoring Session



Meanwhile, the Prague FILMharmonic Orchestra (<http://www.musa.cz/filmharmonic-orchestra.htm>) is sitting in a studio six thousand miles away. Using an internet hook-up, Douek runs the session as if he too were in Prague, but rather than seeing the band through the glass of a sound booth, he watches them on a large television monitor while the takes are uploaded to hard drives in Hollywood. When all the editing is finished, Douek hands everything over to the film's producer and the job is done.

In much the same way that CGI has replaced special effects and scenery in film, digital orchestras have become difficult to distinguish from the real thing. A lot of television 'orchestras' are now digital. Douek uses a library of samples made by players in Vienna and they sound extraordinary: you can hear the rosin on the strings and the breath flowing through a bassoon. It's then odd to think that the players laying down these samples must surely realise they're creating something that will eventually take away work from other musicians.

Peter Kent, a violinist who has had a steady job leading *The Simpsons* orchestra for over ten years, is one of only two hundred or so LA players who can still make a living entirely from session work. In LA, *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* – which both use full orchestral scores – are prized gigs. Kent reckons that job opportunities have dropped by two thirds over the last few years. 'The loss of our work to Europe pales in comparison to what synthesised and sampled music has done to us. And because the business in LA has been dragged down so much, the competitive nature has made it less enjoyable than it used to be,' he says.



The Simpsons
The Alf Clausen Orchestra

● The Simpsons - Testify - A ...

For a hybrid score, Joel Douek will call on the very best players to add some live colour to an otherwise digital score. His go-to flautist is David Weiss in New York. By night Weiss plays on Broadway in *The Lion King* – a job he’s held since the show opened in 1997 – and by day he can be found in studios all over Manhattan, recording film scores and adverts (like the Coca Cola one below), playing a staggering array of exotic wind instruments. He has even turned one room of his rented Brooklyn apartment into a small studio where he can play, engineer and produce solo tracks that Douek and other composers send him. These are then emailed back to LA and mixed in as needed. Some players will even send in tracks recorded in a hotel room with just a laptop and a microphone while they are out on tour.

Both Weiss and Peter Kent know well the skill required to do this work. Weiss says: '98 per cent of it is sight-read so we have to be outstanding at that. Most of the people we get in a session are from the New York Philharmonic and the Met – you’re not going to find better sight-readers than that. I have to do sight-transposition for a lot of my instruments too, and many of them are fairly primitive; they don’t play in a chromatic system, and a lot of times I have to improvise.

Sleepwalker - Coca-Cola Commercial



'For *The Alamo* (2005) I had a really big solo all through the title credits. It colours the movie. The old John Wayne version was a big part of my childhood, and here I was working on a \$100 million motion picture. That’s a big deal!

Violinist Peter Kent adds: 'Some of the music does get fairly complex, but your fingers and technique are usually not stretched on recording sessions. Though, I had a solo on the end credits of an episode a few years ago, based on *The Simpsons* theme, which was devilishly difficult – it had some fast runs in it – and I've been told they just did another one with [Yo-Yo Ma \(/uk/learn/artists/yo-yo-ma\)](/uk/learn/artists/yo-yo-ma) doing almost exactly what I did!"

Recommended



The Tall Man (Original Motion Picture

Todd Bryanton, Joel Douek, Christopher Young, George Acogny, Mitch Dwy

~~([uk/store/products/566420896](#))~~



The Simpsons - Testify - A Whole Lot

Various Artists, The Alf Clausen Orchestra, Bart/Sherri, Dwy

~~([uk/store/products/290229004](#))~~