

# Hitting All the Right Notes

Eight of today's top animation composers discuss their big breaks and offer tips on how to thrive in the toon music business. By Ramin Zahed.

From those early days in the 1920s, music and animation have always enjoyed a special relationship. But the art and business of composing for animated films and series have changed a lot over the past couple of decades thanks to technological advances, as well as the growth of new outlets for content.

"One of the positive aspects of creating music for animation these days is that the tools you need are a lot more affordable," says Christopher Drake, a prolific composer who got his big break in the business writing music for the two animated *Hellboy* movies and went on to work on several DC Comics home-video movies such as *Superman/Batman: Public Enemy*, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *Justice League: Doom*. "You can also learn everything you need to know about the business online. The challenging part is that, because everything is more accessible, the level of competition is also very high and the market is flooded with composers. So you have to be more creative about creating opportunities for yourself."

Of course, the most common question

about composing tunes for toons is: "How do you land a job like that?" The answer is as different as the myriad ways you can get your foot in the door. Drake, for example, got his first gig after meeting horror master Guillermo del Toro at a special haunted Halloween horror show in Studio City, Calif. "It was a special V.I.P. night and people like Frank Darabont, John Landis, Rob Zombie, Joe Dante and Guillermo were there," he says. "He heard the music I had done for the horror show, and we talked about our love of monsters and genre movies, so later, he recommended me for the animated *Hellboy* gig."

A similar chance encounter jumpstarted the music career of Sebastian Evans, whose many TV animation credits include *Super Robot Monkey Team Hyperforce Go!*, *Transformers: Animated*, *Ben 10: Omniverse* and Nickelodeon's current take on the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Evans made a very important toon connection when he arrived in Los Angeles, right after high school, and was waiting in line for *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* in 1999. That's where he met and bonded

with animation veteran Ciro Nieli.

"I moved to L.A. without any formal training in music, and I didn't know anyone in the business," says Evans. "I was very lucky to run into Ciro in line at the movie. He told me about this Warner Bros. animation pilot program, and he was instrumental in me getting my foot in the door. We both loved the same types of movies and TV shows, and I am so glad I got to work with him on many of his shows."

Ever since he was a young boy, Evans knew that he wanted to compose music for animation and fantasy films. So he studied music and taught himself everything he needed to know about creating music all through high school. When he moved to L.A. after high school, he put together a CD with an eclectic mix of all types of music he had created himself. That kind of passion and experimentation with different genres of music is key to landing a job in the business. "You need to be as eclectic and diverse as you can possibly be," he says. "The more styles you are familiar with, the better your chances are of impressing people."

Composer Kevin Kliesch, whose many animation credits include the upcoming

*Tangled: Before Ever After* series, *Sofia the First*, *Tangled*, *ThunderCats* and *Superman: Unbound*, began his career as a composer's assistant, which led to opportunities to orchestrate other composers' scores. "I became known around town as an orchestrator, even though what I had really wanted to do was compose. I spent the next 14 years orchestrating for other composers, until my work on Disney's *Tangled* movie led to an opportunity to score the reboot of the 1980s *ThunderCats* series. I auditioned for that show and got the job, which was my first true job writing the music for a network television show."

*Gravity Falls*, *We Bare Bears* and *Voltron: Legendary Defender* composer Breeck met his wife, Gina, while studying music composition at CalArts. Through Gina, who was an animation major, Breeck met another animator who was working on a couple of Frederator animated shorts. After producing the music for those shorts, he got to compose the music for Frederator-produced series *Fanboy & Chum Chum* for Nickelodeon.

Composer Danny Jacob (*Phineas and Ferb*, *Milo Murphy's Law*) learned the nuts



Brad Breeck



Christopher Drake



Danny Jacob



Frederik Wiedmann

and bolts of song structure and connecting with an audience when he was only 16, playing guitar for a local top-40 band in L.A. bars. After meeting composer Hans Zimmer, through his then-wife, who was the head of DreamWorks' music division, he began arranging and co-producing songs for the studio's features. "I played guitar on the scores for *Shrek* and *Antz* with Harry Gregson-Williams and John Powell," Jacob says. "Then, Disney TV Animation's music department hired me to write theme songs, which led to my work as a composer and song producer for *Phineas and Ferb*."

Coincidentally, composers Gregson-Williams and Zimmer also play parts in how Tony Morales got his first job in the business. Morales, who is working on Disney TV's new series *Elena of Avalor*, first met Gregson-Williams, who was good friends with one of his roommates, in 1998. "I gave Harry my composer demo cassette to pass on to anyone interested in listening," says Morales. "That demo got me a call to compose music for a Blockbuster Video commercial that was being produced through a division of Hans Zimmer's Media Ventures. That commercial was a success, and soon after, I found myself as a staff composer in the commercial department for the following year."

### A Different Beast from Live-Action?

So, is composing music for animation really that different from creating music for live-action projects? Yes and no. For one thing, animated projects often demand wall-to-wall music, which is not the case with live-action

films. Composers also need to turn around the music on a much tighter schedule – often in one or two weeks for a series. Then, of course, there's the variety of stories that animation can offer.

"I often find stories in animation to be more colorful and diverse in their storytelling, adventures and scenarios than many live-action projects," says Ryan Shore, the man behind the music of *Penn Zero: Part-Time Hero* and this year's acclaimed documentary *Floyd Norman: An Animated Life*. "I have a very special place in my heart for animation and animators since the very first scoring opportunities I had were animations. ... I also find that many animated projects, particularly feature animations, can offer a longer period of time in production and post-production than many live-action features, and this extra time allows me more time to think about the story, the characters, the emotions, the themes, etc."

For Morales, animated projects demand much more attention to detail. "Every note counts, and there are a lot of notes required!" he says. "You have to balance the emotional needs of the score with the comedic beats that need to hit picture actions. Marrying the two is a challenge."

Kliesch says he doesn't treat scoring *Sofia the First* any differently than he would a live-action film. "Each episode has its own story arc that needs to be dramatically supported by the music," he says. "I never write down to the target demographic (3- to 7-year old children) – that is, I never intentionally make the music sound like it was meant for kids. I always want the music to have a sense of

complexity and maturity while still supporting the picture."

Frederik Wiedmann, whose credits include *Miles from Tomorrowland*, *All Hail King Julien* and *Beware the Batman*, brings up the pluses and minuses of working without a temp score. "I can't speak for all animated projects, but the ones that I have worked on never had a temporary score," he says. "So I am working with bare material, visuals – sometimes even unfinished/un-rendered – and voice-over and, rarely, sound effects. This requires a lot of imagination, since I only have the verbal conversation about the music and its dramatic needs. It can be intimidating, but also incredibly fulfilling. Temp scores can often be restricting, but having none opens up many more possibilities."

### Secrets of Their Success

Many of the composers interviewed for this piece agree that immersion in different musical styles and learning everything you need to know about the toon music business are key to gaining entry into this competitive field.

"You'll need to have a good grasp of almost every style of music imaginable, since you may be asked to write it at some point in the future," says Kliesch. "Also, you'll need to be very, very good with technology, since almost everything is done inside the computer. About 99 percent of what you hear on *Sofia the First* comes from my home studio setup consisting of three computers playing back samples; the other 1 percent is the occasional live player I'll record from time to

time. But otherwise, it's just me acting as the composer, orchestrator, performer, engineer, recordist and music editor."

"Technology advances are tools in your arsenal," says Jacob. "Learning to play an instrument is essential. When I'm stuck on a musical challenge, I pick up my favorite Gibson Les Paul guitar and just play. Study from the master composers, from Mahler and John Williams to (Led) Zeppelin, and when an opportunity comes along to do spec work, jump at the chance."

Drake believes in learning everything you can about the composers you admire and how they work. "You have to be very creative about your approach," he says. "Watch all the behind-the-scenes interviews on YouTube. Go out there and meet young animators and filmmakers. They are going to be making the big animated hits of tomorrow, and they'll remember you if you're good. You need to maximize your chances of getting hired."

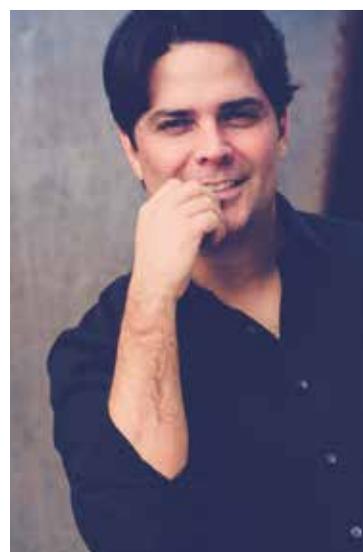
And of course, don't forget that it's not all about the business. "Make sure to live life outside of our industry as well, because regardless of the hat you wear, we're all storytellers, and so the more life you live and experiences you have, the more depth you'll have as a person to offer to the projects you're scoring," says Shore. "I'd also advise people to be very patient, as these careers can take a long time to develop. Meet as many people as possible, always be part of the solution and never stop learning. This last piece of advice may sound obvious, however, be a good person to others." ☞



Kevin Kliesch



Ryan Shore



Tony Morales



Sebastian Evans