A accomplished composer, programmer/sound designer and music producer Jeff Rona has enjoyed a career in music that started over 20 years ago when he began making his way up the ranks as an in-demand programmer and session player. Today Rona composes and produces music for film, television, video games and other media formats from his studio in Santa Monica, CA. He’s also a noted author and speaker on the subject of scoring music for media.

Always one to ride the bleeding edge of technology, Rona has played a hand in shaping the tools and technologies that modern musicians rely on today to create and produce music.

Among the many highlights of his career, he has composed music for Black Hawk Down, Mission Impossible 2, Gladiator and Traffic, to name just a few of the feature films he’s worked on.

We interviewed Rona shortly after he had just finished the score to Phantom, a thriller about a Russian submarine written and directed by Todd Robinson and starring Ed Harris, David Duchovny and William Fichtner. In our conversation Rona provided an in-depth account of the approach he used to create the score for Phantom and shared with us his expert advice on building and sustaining a career as a composer of music for media.
The film was shot on board a Russian submarine anchored in San Diego, CA. I was invited down to record some samples and was given about an hour over a lunch break. We went into this amazing old submarine filled with metal knobs, valves, tubes and hydraulics with several drum sticks and other percussion mallets, including a big rubber hammer. I spent about 40 minutes tapping and banging on everything in there with the different mallets, going from soft to loud so I could make velocity-switched kits. With some of the bigger, more resonant pieces of metal I would do some rhythmic performances and loops of four to eight bars. All of this was recorded onto a Zoom portable field recorder. We took all of this raw audio material back to my studio and started clearing, editing and processing the recordings in [BAS] Peak and using some of the Redmatica sample editing tools [both since discontinued, Ed].

We time-corrected my performances in Ableton Live, sliced them in ReCycle to create Rex files, and then imported them into Spectrasonics Stylus RMX. Other kits went into Native Instruments Kontakt. With everything cleaned up, I went into Logic to begin building a template of my sounds track by track. As I went further I found I could turn some of the percussion instruments from the submarine into pads and melodic instruments by using granular delays and different radical reverbs. I ended up with kits, loops and some pad/harmonic material. I went on to organize a number of newly created synth sounds, percussion and some sampled strings to be replaced by live players later. This all became the groundwork for the more serious passages of sketches.

That was at the end of January [2012]. Then in March they started sending over scenes from the movie for me to start scoring. I took some of my sketches and tried applying them to specific scenes, starting with one sketch that I thought could work well as a main title. As it went on, I started to fill in what themes would work for certain situations. For example, certain ideas went with certain characters and there were recurring ideas in the movie, so I created sonic motifs based on this. Since this was a fairly low-budget film, I didn’t have the budget for a full orchestra but I had enough for a string quartet, so I ended up using the Calder Quartet, a fantastic ensemble out of Los Angeles. In addition to the live strings I bought an antique instrument called a Marxophone, which resembles an ocarina but it has these weighted strings and you sort of play it like a keyboard. Even though it’s an American instrument I thought it had an interesting sound quality that sounded vaguely Russian or Eastern European. It’s a little like a hammered dulcimer or balalaika. I ended up writing a motif with that instrument.

I also did some sound design in [Spectrasonics] Omnisphere and [Native Instruments] Absynth. Other acoustic instruments included flute, which I played, and I added a trumpet player. This all became the sonic palette for the score.

JR: It sounds like your compositional process was influenced considerably by sound design.

JR: It’s important to remember that in contemporary scoring you can’t think of sounds in a generic way. Very often when I create a unique or evocative sound, that sound is only evocative if it’s played in a very specific way, just like with acoustic instruments. You can’t write the same thing for a string section as you’ll write for a trombone section, for example. Every sound you create electronically will “ask” you to compose certain kinds of ideas for it. In the case of Phantom, and many projects I’ve done before, sound design doesn’t take the place of composition, but it needs to come before the composing process. After pulling together sounds that I feel belong in the film, I’ll improvise extensively to get to know them and what they offer musically. By approaching writing this way, the sounds I create or choose become an organic aspect of writing because they’re being treated as their own instruments in the same way I might write for more conventional acoustic instruments.

JR: Is that typical of your compositional process, where you’ll work to create a lot of unique sounds and then apply more conventional compositional concepts to these electronic instruments or textures?

JR: For a score with a fair amount of programming and sound design, yes, although the sound design continues to evolve throughout the whole process of scoring. However, I do change my focus at some point early on. I like to feel that I am to some degree, finished with the sound design phase, so I can set my brain completely to focusing on the actual writing of music.

JK: That raises the question of how you maintain consistency from one cue or sequence to the next. I tend to mix through it better, I use the Channel Strip preset function in Logic to save variations on particular sounds that I can then import into other cues. But I do sometimes use busses for generic reverbs and delays and possibly distortion effects. That works really well for me. I’m able to move from cue to cue pretty quickly, and everything that was in other cues is there in my new session, either because I saved a session using Save As or because I use the channel strip presets and I’m able to bring in a particular sound just as it was in another cue. Also, there’s a cue that’s going to be a variation of another cue I’ll start with that piece, save it as another session and from there I change the key or tempo or some other musical elements.

JK: So you just hold yourself to that template without changing EQ and other effects?

JK: Oh, no. Sound design is an integral part of contemporary composition, and that’s also true for mixing. The balance between background and foreground, rhythm and ambience, chords and melodies — these are all sensitive and critical issues. Even if I do things electronically that will be replaced by

For composers, bringing in a particular sound just as it was in another cue can be challenging. There’s a cue that’s going to be a variation of another cue, and I’ll start with that piece, save it as another session, and from there, I change the key or tempo or some other musical elements. So you just hold yourself to that template without changing EQ and other effects? Oh, no. Sound design is an integral part of contemporary composition, and that’s also true for mixing. The balance between background and foreground, rhythm and ambience, chords and melodies — these are all sensitive and critical issues. Even if I do things electronically that will be replaced by...
a live player or orchestra, I’m always work-
ing on the mix. First of all, I need to get the music approved by the producers and direc-
tor, and they need to hear it exactly the way I hear it. So I absolutely use very meticulous
mixing as part of the composing process. You can’t have one without the other.

Composing for Media: Career Realities

JR What role does technology and one’s fluency with it play in the life of a modern composer for media?

JEFF RONA And, obviously, technology counts.

JR That’s such a great question. If you’ve ever heard a bad violin player, you realize that somebody who doesn’t have technical capacity can’t express themselves musically very well. There are exceptions. You could say there are famous rock musicians who only know three chords and never took a
lesson. But that’s a different thing than
working with somebody who has the technical ability to express themselves musically successfully in music has some form of technical ability and know how.

In composing music for film or TV or any medium, if you’re not good with the technol-
gy at hand you’ll be just like somebody
who’s been handed a violin but doesn’t
know how to play. When I sit down to write, I’ve
learned my studio well enough that I’m not
thinking about it. I’m not thinking, “What’s the
keyboard short cut for quantizing eighth
notes or how do I layer and combine these
two parts, or whatever.” It’s all under
my fingers. You hear some musicians talk about how they no longer think when they play, they’ve already mastered their instru-
ments to a level that they don’t have to think — they’re able to just play and express themselves. It’s nearly impossible to think and do at the same time. It’s the same with the studio technology. If you are confused or
unsure of the technology, then you’re not in
the creative place inside of you where music comes from, which can be a very quiet place — you’re going to miss it.

JEFF RONA You’ve worked on episodic TV, feature film and more recently video games. What chal-
 lenges do you constantly face?

JR Composers are constantly challenged with very strict schedules and budgets.

And yet my goal as an artist is to never lose touch with what’s important, which is writ-
ing and producing good music regardless of
limits. The challenge is having to make compromises with time and budget always
leaves me on my toes. So working with live players, working with an orchestrator, working with an engineer, how we pass files around, how we record orchestras in other
countries, making sure that the final product
sounds every bit as good as every other film
score ever made or better — these are the
challenges. As our tools improve — better plug-ins and systems for working with audio — I have to think about the final
result all the time. It’s important to remem-
ber that it’s a multi-stage process. My role
is a “hyphenate.” Every composer’s role is
kind of a multitasking hyphenate.

We are music producers. And what is the
role of every music producer? To maintain

the highest quality possible within the
given budget and time constraints.

We may have to know what the best reverb
is for a piano sample or the best way to
interest a tool such as Ableton Live into
an action scene or how to get a particular
drum sound to be aggressive or mysterious.

We’re called on to know who the interesting
musicians are to collaborate with and the
best ways to do that where I can maintain a
great deal of control over the final product,
especially if things have to change after
the recording session with the players. Am
I using Melodyne or AutoTune? Am I going
to bring in an engineer before the final mix?
Like every other working composer, I have
to be conscientious about the quality of the
music creatively, conceptually, emotion-
ally and technically.

JR You used the term “final product.” The awareness that you are creating a product
is often foreign to young composers who are not used to looking at their musical
compositions as products that go through
tremendous scrutiny by producers, directors and creatives. Do you find yourself emotion-
ally divorcing yourself from a piece of music
when it comes time to present it to a client?

JR The number one thing to remember is
that film composers are storytellers and
collaborators; and as such our musical visions have to take a back seat to the
project and to what is trying to be achieved
emotionally, as a whole. To that end, when I
write something, I’m fully present and com-
mitted to what I’m trying to do emotionally.

I go into thinking I know what the director
intended and what I think the director
feels would be able to express that intent
musically. In a good situation I get that
right more than I get it wrong. But invariably
something will come up or a director will
say, “That’s not what I had in mind,” or “The

music is getting too busy too fast,” or “That
doesn’t sustain the energy long enough,” or “The

music needs to stay low-key until a later scene and
then let loose.”

In those situations my first musical instinct
needs to be discarded and I must do some-
thing different. That’s the nature of this
work. I have the option of tossing out what I
did and starting over or I could substantially
alter a piece of music to more closely fit
what the director wants. In the end, all that
matters is that my director eventually says,”Okay, you got me and you understand the
story.” That’s my goal.

Nobody makes a movie all by themselves, it’s a collaborative art form. What we as
composers do is one piece of a shared
vision. You can’t take criticism or notes
personally. For example, if a
director says something like, “This doesn’t
feel scary enough,” you just have to say
to yourself, “Okay, it scared the shit out of
me, but the director’s not scared, so how
do we do that?” It’s sometimes a matter of
semantics. I have to figure out what “scary” is
to him. We can use words like sad, joyful,
frricing or dramatic. But what those


words mean to me might be different for

the director and different for the producer.

You have to be willing to let go of your own
musical preconceptions in order to fulfill
the vision of the final product.

JR There’s always some degree of transla-
tion between what the client is asking for and
what that means musically.

JR Absolutely. And you should never feel
that you are a lesser artist for not getting
everything right the first time.

JR Describe the competitive nature of com-
posing music for film or TV.

JR It’s not only a very, very competitive field.
It’s also always changing. What filmmakers
are looking for musically changes. It’s
important to stay relevant, which is not always easy. Composers are hired for a mul-
tiplicity of reasons; musical abilities being


one of them, but far from being all of it.

The one thing a composer offers a film-
maker, which is perhaps more important
than anything is trustworthiness. A film
may cost millions of dollars and take years
to get off the ground. So the filmmak-
ers have to feel completely confident that
they’ve chosen well and that their composer
will deliver music that enhances the film, is
technically excellent, is delivered on time
and on budget, and that the process of getting
to the end — the give and take — is one
that they will enjoy. There is a deep sense of
intimacy in this relationship. Confidence in
a composer is critically important. And one
of the first things that will give filmmakers
confidence in their choice of composer is
an interesting résumé. If they see a composer
has worked on other successful projects, they
not only think, “Oh, I liked that type of
music or that was a good movie,” but they
also think, “Here’s a composer who finished
that score on time and on budget.” It’s a
very basic thing. Look, do you want to be
Advice for Young Composers

JK What do young composers need to have in order to get scoring opportunities?

JR As I mentioned earlier, a composer needs to show how to instill confidence in a film maker, and just about the only way to do that is with a resume. If you’re a young composer or filmmaker who doesn’t have much of a resume, then you need to show what you’re capable of as a musician, meaning that you need to have finished demo tracks that sound like contemporary film music. Often there are young composers who may have demos that may be well written and well produced, but don’t reflect the kind of aesthetic and appeal that filmmakers are looking for. Film music is a genre, but there are certain elements that make certain kinds of music work better in film and TV. When you listen to the vast majority of film music, you tend to hear a simplicity and an emotional directness that you don’t necessarily hear in other forms of music. You don’t hear a lot of complex chamber music in the mainstream of film scores, and there’s a reason for that. So composers need to show what they’re capable of, which means showing a range of musical styles, showing a good attitude about music, showing that they understand what makes music work emotionally in a film, and that they know how to be good producers. Obviously helps if you’re put over a number and have had experience in some other area of the music industry. But at the end of the day, you need to prove that you can be trusted with a multi-million dollar project or a project of ten thousand dollars, whatever it is. You need to show that the risk of hiring you as a composer is incredibly low. And of course, you get better with each project. You’re always learning and hopefully, if you’re a good artist, you’re trying to grow.

JK How important is it to find mentors for young composers who are just starting their career?

JR I think it’s extremely important. I know very few composers who didn’t get their start by working with another composer, or at the very least being exposed to other composers and gaining knowledge from more experienced composers. Even when Trent Reznor started doing films he approached more established composers and asked for help and advice. Nobody should be expected to be able to do it without any mentorship. Even if you study formally and you’re coming out of an academic environment like your program, it’s such a huge help to gain some intermediary experience. It use the surgery metaphor again. Before a surgeon gets to do a liver transplant, they assist a more experienced surgeon hundreds of times, each time taking a more active role as they learn. That’s how everybody know their start by working with another more experienced composer to learn the ropes. There’s a lot of logistics to get down, and the politics are unexpected and can be make or break. How one talks to a director or producer, how one deals with unreasonable demands or expectations or setbacks.

The way to learn is to watch someone else go through it with you at their elbow. To be able to write a piece of music to picture and then have a peer listen to it before the director and tell you what you got right and what you got wrong is invaluable. Most every A-list composer today had somebody show them what to do. Look, John Williams was Bernard Hermann’s piano player. What advice can you give young composers as they’re coming up and trying to build a career?

Even though I love composing, I was very lucky I had a marketable skill before having the opportunity to compose for film and TV. I could design sounds and program synthesizers in ways that were interesting and appealing to working, successful film composers. So I was a programmer for a few years. My name got passed around. That was “phase one” of my film music education. In the process I got to watch a lot of films being scored, and that led to opportunities to ghost write. But I had something to trade; I had something I could give a composer. I think it’s beneficial for anyone who wants to be a composer in film or TV to find an internship or some kind of relationship with a working, successful composer. If were to break it down, it would be: Step one — get your shit together musically and personally. Be a good composer, have something to say as a musician. Then develop the technical production chops needed to realize your musical ideas in audio. You need to be able to make good music sound good. As a film composer you’re both a composer and producer. Until you’ve built some experience don’t go out into the world thinking you’re ready. Find opportunities to connect with more experienced composers, musicians, orchestrators, and engineers. Another possible way to go about it is to be successful in some other area of music. If you have a successful pop or rock career you have a chance to get into scoring for picture, like Trent Reznor, Daft Punk, M83, Danny Elfman, Hans Zimmer, Cliff Martinez, Badly Drawn Boy, Stewart Copeland, Trevor Rabin, Karen O, Skrillex, and many others.

JK Any parting thoughts for our McNally Smith composition students?

JR Getting to write music that other people listen to is a privilege. Working with other talented people is a privilege. Never taking anything for granted has been a key to a happier and more enlightened life for me. I think it’s also important to never assume you are ever a fully realized artist. You should always continue to challenge yourself and grow as an artist and as a human being.

For me, the greatest thrill I get from my work is knowing that what I do allows people to feel something; it excites emotion. Whether it’s emotions of fear, joy or a sense of romance. As a human being we’re emotion junkies, we want to feel emotions. And that’s why we gravitate to music and film. We’re after an experience. So for me to be a part of a world that gives people emotional experiences is never less than incredibly satisfying as a fellow human and an artist.

For more about Jeff Rona’s career and film scores visit www.jeffrona.com.

There are more films, TV shows and web series being made now than ever before, so the demand for people to write and produce music for media continues to grow.