

A winning score

Composer Debbie Wiseman talks to Simon Burton about writing music for film, television, and the Diamond Jubilee



image: Martyn Goddard



For most people, film music is something in the background, not anything to be noticed unless it's a popular song. However, imagine your favourite film without music: think of 'Jaws' without John Williams' menacing score; or 'Chariots of Fire' without Vangelis' triumphant main theme. As a composer for film and television, Debbie Wiseman is keenly aware of the effect of music over moving images.

"When an audience goes to see a film, everything that they would naturally take for granted is enhanced so much by the music, that people barely notice it," says Wiseman. "Music adds this hugely important dimension to the picture; one which you can only do with music, that you can't always do with words. The music goes straight to the heart, because if the music is telling you to feel something, you do. It's a very powerful force in a film."

Wiseman has been a prolific and highly regarded composer for film and television for almost 30 years, and was awarded an MBE in 2004 for her services to the British film industry. Among the projects she has scored (written music for) are: the family film 'Tom's Midnight Garden'; the television series 'Judge John Deed'; the French action adventure film 'Arsene Lupin'; and the biopic 'Wilde', starring Stephen Fry.

This wide range of genres and styles is one of the more exciting parts of composing for film and television, as Wiseman explains:

"What's so exciting about the job that I do is that every project is so different. One moment you're writing very nostalgic music for a series set in the 60s, and then the next I might be writing for an action adventure film, or a horror film, or a psychological thriller. If you're lucky to work on lots of different projects, as I have been, you get inspiration from the stories. You're never just sitting at the piano thinking 'what am I going to write today', because you've got this film, which is inspiring; it helps you come up with the music."

Together with ten other British composers, Wiseman was chosen to write a piece for 'The New Water Music', which was performed on one of the hundreds of boats involved in the Thames Diamond Jubilee Pageant.

"We were given individual titles for each movement," recalls Wiseman. "I was given Gigue, which is sort of like a country dance, but I didn't know the music that the other composers were writing. We all had the same line-up of instruments, so we knew what the parameters were; and we were given a kind of brief, knowing that it was going to have to be heard by people along the riverbank. It was going to have to be quite robust music, because it was going to need to be heard in any weather. As it turned out, of course, that was good, because it was quite a wet and windy day! It was a lovely experience, the whole day was absolutely magical; being on the river with all those boats was the most wonderful experience."

The experience also allowed Wiseman the opportunity to meet with fellow composers, something which, for such a relatively small group of people, is actually a rare occurrence.

"It's completely unusual that we ever get to meet at all. The only time we really get to meet is at industry functions, or at things like awards' ceremonies. It was really lovely to have the opportunity to meet these people who do the same kind of job as you, and chat with them."

For such an important part of the film and television experience, music composition is a relatively unknown element of production; so how did Wiseman find herself writing music for film?

"I've always loved the idea of writing to pictures, and that's why I was drawn to writing for film. I suppose my first love is just simply writing music. The act of writing music is endlessly rewarding, and there's nothing I like more than just sitting at the piano and coming up with a tune. I also like collaboration, and the thing about writing for a film or television production is that you're very much part of a team; the director, the producers, the editor, the executive producers. So it's a very collaborative medium; whereas when you're writing for the concert hall and standalone pieces it's exactly the opposite, you're really on your own, and you don't get to throw ideas around with anyone else."

Throughout her career, Wiseman has collaborated with a number of esteemed directors and producers, and has formed several lasting working relationships, including with Stephen Fry, who she met whilst scoring 'Wilde'; lyricist Don Black, with whom she is currently working on a musical version of 'Feather Boy'; director Peter Kosminsky, with whom she has worked five times; and vocalist Hayley Westenra, who has provided haunting tones for 'Flood', 'Arsene Lupin', and 'Lesbian Vampire Killers'.

"You do find that there are people that you love collaborating with and you do want to do as much as you can with them," explains Wiseman. "Obviously there's not always going to be that opportunity, but when the opportunity arises, it's great. One of my favourite directors was Lewis Gilbert. The first film we worked on together was called 'Haunted', with Aiden Quinn and Kate Beckinsale. At that stage he was coming up to 80 years old and he had more energy than everybody else on set; he was an absolute inspiration. Every time I've worked with Lewis, it's such great fun; he's got a great sense of humour and he loves music, so he brings out the best in me really, which is great. 'Haunted' was a particularly lovely experience and I think you tend to get wrapped up in the experience when you write, and that makes it one of my favourite scores."

With such a varied range of genres and styles, Wiseman benefits from a more classical background, including periods spent studying at the Trinity College of Music and at the Guildhall School of

Music and Drama.

"When I was studying at college we were always encouraged to write quite avant-garde music," Wiseman remembers. "I would always sort of rebel against it, because I wanted to write melodic music. But then I found Olivier Messiaen's music, and that somehow opened the door to write that sort of music. It was slightly more accessible, and I could draw pictures in my mind to the music. He used to go out and listen to birds with their wonderful birdsong, and translate it into music. As a film composer, I could relate to that idea."

This traditional musical education has stayed with her ever since, informing the way in which she continues to write music.

"I like the physical act of actually sitting at a piano and writing the notes on a page. I don't think I'd be happy just sitting at a computer keyboard and tapping it all in. I like the physical act of actually writing it, and connecting with it, with a bit of manuscript paper, and writing black dots on a page. There's something very personal about that, and I think I'll probably always work like that."

As well as presently working with Don Black on 'Feather Boy', Wiseman is currently scoring 'Father Brown', a detective series for the BBC.

"It's actually fun doing 'Father Brown', because what I'm doing is planting a little bit of doubt over one of the suspects musically. You kind of throw in a musical red herring, and then it's not him in the end. That's really good fun when you can do that."

This darker side of scoring is something Wiseman hopes to be

able to explore further in future projects.

"I do quite like writing dark, moody music, so maybe some more psychological thrillers, which lend themselves to music very well, because you can plant the seeds of doubt with music. I'd quite like to do more action adventure films, as well. I've done one or two, and I've absolutely loved it."

In addition to her own potential opportunities, Wiseman is also enthusiastic about the broader future of film music, and she takes an active role in educating prospective composers in the understanding of writing music for film and television. She presented 'Backtracks' for Channel 4, which was a series aimed at schools about writing music to pictures; regularly visits schools and colleges to lecture on the subject; and has also composed a new 'Young person's Guide to the Orchestra', called 'Different Voices'.

"I think it's very helpful if, when you learn about music, that you also learn about the way it can work with another medium," Wiseman enthuses, continuing; "How it can work within a film, or in a television series, or even listening to how music can be used usefully. It can be at its most dramatic when it's coupled with another medium. And that medium might be a film, or a ballet, or an opera, but it's at its most powerful when it means something, and drama is the most important part of music. It makes you listen more, I think, and music is all about how you listen, and how you respond to it. I think it's a hugely important thing, because if music doesn't mean anything, then I don't know what it's there for."



Image: Phil Watkins