

Michael McNulty  
Rising Third-Year Award  
Faculty Advisor: Michael Rasbury  
**Compositional Tools for Career as a Film Composer**

### *Project Overview*

I am applying for a rising third-year award that will allow me to purchase an external hard drive for my computer, a keyboard MIDI controller, and two professional quality orchestral sound libraries: the "BBC Orchestra Professional" and the "SWAM All In Bundle" libraries.

Throughout my career at UVA I have come to realize that music composition is something that I want to do professionally. At UVA I have written three original pieces that have been performed by the UVA Jazz Ensemble, an original score for a two hour long radio show, and an original piece for full orchestra. Currently I am working on scores for two short films being made by the UVA Drama Department and I have two more short films lined up for the summer. Through my independent study of jazz composition with John D'earth and music Phd candidate Rami Stucky, my coursework including Orchestration I and Music Theory II, and my continuous writing and listening, I feel that my writing has improved to a level where a career in composition is a viable option for me. Attached is a live rhythm section recording and full score of the piece I most recently finished for the UVA Jazz Ensemble, "Beings In Love" (music sample 1). Through my experience writing for a large variety of ensembles and projects as listed above, I have found that composition for film and theatre is the career path in composition that I am most interested in pursuing.

In order to best pursue this career I reached out to Professor Michael Rasbury at the beginning of this semester for advice, who in addition to teaching at the university is a sound designer and composer for theatre. After meeting several times throughout this semester, Professor Rasbury informed me that in addition to hard work and talent, an important element of what will make me competitive in this particular field of composition is good equipment. The primary reason for this is that the large majority of projects do not have the budget to pay composers to use live instruments or recording studios. This means that in order to produce a wide variety of music in an affordable way, a composer that wants to write for instruments beyond just what they play must be able to digitally realize their own scores to a level where the digital playback sounds realistic.

As I've learned from Professor Rasbury, using a computer to effectively make notated music come to life comes down to two components: computing power and having access to a wide variety of sounds. A sound library is a collection of pre-recorded or digitally produced sounds that can be used to simulate playing a live instrument or a sound effect. The scores I currently write are all written digitally in the notation software Sibelius. Sibelius has its own sound library that allows a composer to hear what they've written, but this particular library is of a very low quality and cannot be used to present compositions in a manner where they sound legitimate. To get to a point where the playback is actually realistic, especially for orchestral instruments which are the hardest to digitize, one needs to purchase additional libraries composed of samples of real instruments being played by real people. The two libraries that I have requested with this grant are the two libraries that, according to Professor Rasbury, are

best able to produce professional quality orchestral sounds. Because of the high cost of these libraries these tools would otherwise be unattainable to me without this grant. In the past I've had to pay people who have access to better sound libraries than I do to digitally realize my scores. Attached is an original piece called "Twelfth Night Theme" (music sample 2) where this was necessary. Once I own these libraries I will in theory no longer have to outsource my digital production for the rest of my career.

Because these libraries are so high quality and realistic it also means they take up a lot of space and require a lot of computing power to use. My family and I have decided to invest in a new computer that would allow me to use these libraries, but there is still the issue of how to store these libraries since they take up much more space than an average computer has room for. In order to store my sound libraries and access them quickly, I am requesting grant money for an external hard drive of size 2TB.

Once I have the libraries and have them stored on a hard drive, the final step toward digitally realizing a score in a convincing way is to actually be able to use the sounds in these libraries effectively and efficiently. The last item I am requesting with this grant is a midi keyboard with 61 keys, a pitch wheel, a modulation wheel with 8 additional faders and control knobs. Having this piece of equipment will exponentially increase the speed of my composing because I will be able to play the part for any instrument on piano into the computer instead of notating everything by hand. The additional wheels, faders, and knobs of this particular keyboard will allow me to access the variety of different samples, articulations, and effects that come with each individual instrument in these sound libraries.

To ensure that I am using this equipment properly and to its full potential if this grant is awarded, I have decided to take an independent study with Professor Rasbury next semester where we will spend time learning how to best use this equipment. After taking this independent study I will be able to apply my equipment and skills to composing and digitally realizing music for larger scale UVA theatre productions and films which often use pre-recorded music and any other compositional project I undertake while at UVA and beyond.

To present my research of digitally realizing orchestral scores with this equipment I have very specific goals. In the fall of 2020 I took Orchestration I with Professor Ben Rous where we learned the basics of writing for orchestra. In the fall of 2021 I will enroll in Orchestration II which will build upon the skills of that class, specifically focusing on the orchestration styles of Maurice Ravel and John Williams, the latter of whom is the greatest film composer of all time. My compositional goal in this project is to learn all I can about full orchestra composition for film by studying the compositional style of John Williams. This will be started over the summer of 2021 by completing a deep study of two of John Williams's scores: *Star Wars Suite* for Orchestra and *Witches, Wands, and Wizards*.

In the fall of 2021 I will use my time in Orchestration II to further develop my orchestral compositional skills while at the same time writing a substantive, around 8 minute, piece for full orchestra in the style of John Williams. As I am writing this orchestral piece I will work with Professor Rasbury to digitize my piece using the equipment purchased with this grant. This way, I will be learning about writing orchestral composition for film and digitally producing orchestral compositions for film at the same time. I will finish this composition by the end of the fall semester and finish the digital mastering of this composition over winter break. If possible I would love to have this composition read or performed by the Charlottesville Symphony.

*Budget:*

Keyboard Midi Controller - \$260

<https://www.sweetwater.com/store/detail/LaunchK3-61--novation-launchkey-61-mk3-61-key-key-board-controller>

External 2TB Hard drive - \$370 with USB-C

<https://eshop.macsales.com/shop/external-drives/OWC-Envoy-Pro>

BBC Symphony Orchestra Professional - \$1000

<https://www.spitfireaudio.com/bbcso/>

Solo Instrument Library - \$1400

<https://audiomodeling.com/>

**Total Project Cost: \$3030**

\*All items were selected in consultation with Professor Rasbury

\*\*The additional \$30 will be covered out of pocket

## *Project Timeline*

May 2021

- Meet with Professor Rous to discuss important sections to cover in the John Williams scores this summer
- Order all necessary equipment should project be funded

June 1 - July 10 2021

- Study *Star Wars Suite* by John Williams

July 11 - August 2021

- Study *Witches, Wands, and Wizards* by John Williams\*

September 2021

- Begin writing small sections for final composition
- Use independent study with Professor Rasbury to get set up with all the equipment

October - November 2021

- Continue to write final composition and finish by the end of the fall semester
- Digitally realize finished sections as written in independent study

December 2021

- Spend winter break finishing my digital realization of my composition

January 2022

- Work with Charlottesville Symphony to see if finished piece can be read or performed

April 2022

- Present final project

\*Scores to study were chosen in consultation with Professor Ben Rous

## *Participation in the Arts*

### Ensemble Participation

- UVA Jazz Ensemble (guitarist) Fall 2019 - present
- Jazz Small Group (guitarist) Fall 2019 - present
- Charlottesville Symphony (bassoonist) Spring 2020 - present
- Rotunda Bassoon Ensemble (bassoonist) Fall 2019 - Spring 2020

### Composition

- UVA Jazz Ensemble (3 original pieces) Fall 2019 - present
  - Studying composition with John D'earth and Rami Stucky
- Composer for *Twelfth Night: The Radio Show!* (full score)\* Fall 2020
- Composer for short film *Twist and Bend* (full score)\* Spring 2021
- Composer for short film *Fish Don't Have Maps* (full score) Spring 2021

### Coursework

- MUSI 3410 Orchestration I Fall 2020
  - Introduction to writing for Orchestra
- MUSI 3320 Theory II Spring 2021
  - Introduction to composing for four part harmony

\*MAS Collaboration

## *Closing*

I am very excited about the prospect of working on this project over the next year and feel strongly that doing this research with this equipment will have a profound effect on my career. I am incredibly grateful to the Miller Arts Scholar program for any funds that would be available to allow me to pursue my professional goals and thank the committee for their consideration.