

# Penka Kouneva-Schweiger Private Masterclass in Media Composing and Soundtrack Analysis August 2024

Grammy-winning composer and studio orchestrator Penka Schweiger has composed on iconic video games (*League of Legends*, *Prince of Persia*), the Netflix Animated Series *Dragon Age: Absolution*, a NASA theme park at the Kennedy Space Center, and numerous feature films (the Oscar contender *Aga*, Sony Pictures releases - *Encounter* and *Devil's Whisper*, and Cannes and Berlinale favorites, and more recently, a dozen movies-of-the-week streaming on Tubi, Apple, etc). In 2019 she was invited by composer Joe Kraemer to co-compose The CW primetime TV series, *Pandora*. Penka holds a Ph.D. in composition from Duke University and is known as a great mentor who has helped over 100 young composers and orchestrators cultivate remarkable careers in Hollywood. She is excited to share her knowledge and passion for score analysis with composers in all phases of their careers (emerging, early professional, established). Questions: penkakouneva@gmail.com

## What is it?

### • 12 weeks of intensive study including:

- **10 Weekly guided scoring assignments:** 1:15 - 2:00 minutes scoring to picture
  - **10 Weekly 30-minute private mentoring:** Review & written feedback on your scoring assignments, career and artistic growth and guidance, answering your questions (weekly scheduled private lesson on Zoom).
  - **10 Weekly 75-minute Lectures:** score analyses presented by the instructor in a small group on Zoom. Each week we analyze selected cues from 5+ original soundtracks.
  - **Weekly guided independent study** (soundtrack listening, score study, reading of articles, interviews, blogs, “behind-the-scenes” videos and relevant content: ~3 hours).
  - **Two “off” weeks for catching up** on reading, revisions and soundtrack study. Your music reels, introduction (“highlights”) reel, website, biography, cover letters, and marketing materials will be reviewed & critiqued during these “off” weeks.
- The Composer Master Class focuses on composing mastery, techniques and skills via **analysis of great soundtrack cues** and **weekly feedback on your original compositions** (industry-tailored assignments).
  - The ideal Master Class taker is:
    - a recent graduate seeking to create industry-level demos to pitch for scoring jobs.
    - an emerging composer striving to ‘level-up’ and get scoring jobs.
    - a mid-career professional pivoting into media scoring from an adjacent music career
    - an established composer seeking to break through stagnation, or to diversify their well of inspiration.
  - The Master class will take **12 weeks (3 months)**. Two “off” weeks will take place to give you time to complete your scoring assignments & revisions, and catch up on all score study & soundtrack listening.
  - Intensive weekly composing (to picture and not to picture) and weekly feedback on your cues gives you a **competitive edge and a body of work** polished at the industry standard that you can submit & adapt for future scoring opportunities.
  - You will craft **nine original compositions by the end of the course**, from your original idea to a **fully produced & mixed demo**. You can use these for future demos for actual jobs, and on your reel.
  - Weekly score analysis of cues, reading and study materials presented by the instructor. All scores are current, masterful scores by Hollywood composers. Score analysis is a core component of the curriculum. All score PDFs, charts, presentations & reading materials will be provided by the Instructor.
  - The learning is industry-oriented and personalized.
  - Cost \$1,000 USD (tax-deductible in the US as a *vocational expense / educational expense* via the Instructor’s corporation Penka Kouneva Studios, Inc.)

## Prerequisites:

- Music program bachelor’s degree or similar

- Ability to read orchestral scores
- A few film, game, additional-music, or concert music credits (entry-level; student projects are OK)
- **Working proficiency** with music production and mixing *a graduate-level sounding demo* with virtual instruments. This skill will be expected, commented on, but not covered in detail. (There are many other classes that focus on Music Production.)
- You will receive feedback on your production skills. “Graduate-level sounding demo” is defined as a realistically sounding emulation of the ensemble you are composing for, with well-balanced instrumental lines, dynamics and expression – the skills you’ve learned in your bachelor’s program.
- Commitment to a scoring career, or actively exploring opportunities.
- Commitment to completing the class (contract will be signed).

## Curriculum + Weekly Scoring Assignments

### Composing Assignments – in red

1. **THEMES and THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT.** Compose themes and “audition demos” for scoring jobs. Compose two 1-minute themes not to picture but to keywords, reference mp3s and concept (storyboard, “mood book”). Due the following week.

How do you go from receiving a *Brief for a demo*, to composing a theme, to delivering a fully produced, competitive mockup in 4-6 days (a typical deadline for demos on scoring jobs)?

Methodology: 1. Decipher the assignment. Consider the clients’ expectations. Analyze their “style guides.”

2. “Research & Development”: **listen to soundtracks**, review the syntax & style of this “genre.”

3. Distill *elements relevant to this demo*.

4. Gather your **‘building blocks’** (sample libraries, instruments, plug-ins, ideas). Does this demo call for a hybrid score? Electronic score? Traditional orchestral score?

5. Compose dozens of ideas, discard many of them.

6. Compose the specific *theme* and/or **“musical signature”** for this job.

7. Sequence, *synthestrated*, revise.

Analysis: Steve Jablonsky – Theme for *Gears of War 2*

Nathan Barr – *Uncle Frank*

Penka Kouneva – *Claire Vick, Airplane*

Neal Acree – *World of Warcraft - Battle for Azeroth*

Alexandre Desplat – *The Golden Compass* – Opening Titles, Sky Ferry

2. **HARMONY, RE-HARMONIZATION & COUNTERPOINT.** Use harmony, counterpoint, modulations used for thematic development, variations, contrast, building a dramatic arc in a cue. Extend ONE of your themes from Week 1 also expanding it emotionally.

Analysis: Harry Gregson-Williams – *The Martian* (Making Water - counterpoint, thematic contrast)

Sarah Schachner – *Anthem* video game (thematic development)

Bear McCreary – *The Rings of Power* series, S1 Amazon - #6 The Stranger (reharmonization)

Joe Kraemer / Penka Kouneva – *Pandora*, Ralen’s themes (re-harmonization)

Penka Kouneva – Solar Flare (inspired by *Ebrietas* – *Bloodborne*: thematic development)

3. **RHYTHM, METER & TEMPO** in Media Scoring. Score Pandora 201m32 (two tempos).

Direction: Suspense-action-aftermath-build to ActOut

Analysis: Penka Kouneva – NASA “*Heroes and Legends*” Theme park – *Gemini 8*

Ludwig Goransson – *Oppenheimer* – #2 Can you hear the music?

Steve Jablonsky – *Skyscraper, Red Notice* soundtracks - action cues

Alexandre Desplat – Western-inspired cues for Animation

Marco Beltrami - *Knowing* – #5 New York

4. **THREE-DIMENSIONAL ORCHESTRATION, TEXTURE, ARRANGEMENT.**

Score a cue – choose one clip only (ENC Uber driver, Genius doc, 3M TV spot).

Analysis: Neal Acree *Overwatch* Dragons

Steve Jablonsky – *The Tiger’s Apprentice* animated feature  
Austin Wintory – *Abzu* video game  
Acree/Tuller – *Animal World* action feature film  
Penka Kouneva – *Storming* from *H-Hour* video 1<sup>st</sup> person shooter; Wagner *Die Walküre*

## 5. FORM: classically-inspired forms & syntax in media scoring

No new scoring this week. Watch Episodes 1, 2, 3 of *Dragon Age Absolution* on Netflix

Analysis: Carlos Rafael Rivera – *The Queen’s Gambit*  
Jessica Curry – *Everyone’s Gone To The Rapture* video game  
Alexandre Desplat – *Little Women #22* Snow in the Garden  
Bernard Herrmann – *Psycho*  
Lolita Ritmanis – *Blizzard of Souls* (period drama war film)  
Borislav Slavov - *Divinity: Original Sin 2* video game  
Kouneva – *Forest* from TWA

## 6. FORM: pop & rock-inspired forms & syntax in media scoring. COMEDY and ANIMATION genre.

Score a 1:50 cue to picture based on a conceptual brief, “style guides (mp3s) and an animatic (DAA Hira’s entrance). Watch Episodes 4, 5, 6 of *Dragon Age Absolution* on Netflix

Analysis: Neal Acree - *Revelation* fantasy video game  
Thomas Newman – *Elemental* (Animation feature film)  
Mark Orton – *The Holdovers* (comedy - Americana)  
Zimmer / Balfe / Slavov – *Crysis 2* video game  
Kouneva - *Dragon Age: Absolution* Netflix animated series

## 7. ANALYSIS OF GENRES: DRAMA and DOCUMENTARY. Tropes & musical signifiers.

Collaborative techniques, implementing feedback, understanding “directorese.”  
Getting out of a creative bind (“writer’s block”).

Score a drama cue (2 clips to choose from – *Blue* or *Pandora Ascension*).

Analysis: Sharon Farber – *Brainwashed* documentary  
Alexandre Desplat – *Eiffel* (romantic drama)  
Nathan Barr – *House With Clocks In Its Walls* (family, fantasy, period film)  
Kris Bower - *Origin* - documentary  
Anthony Willis – *Saltburn* (drama, thriller)  
Christophe Beck & Matthew Feder – *Arnold* - documentary

## 8. ANALYSIS OF GENRES: HORROR & THRILLER. Tropes & musical signifiers.

Score a 1:00-2:00 Horror-mystery cue to picture (2 clips to choose from: *ENC Magnetic play* or *Applewood Book Reading*).

Analysis: Bear McCreary – *10 Cloverfield Lane*  
Danny Bensi & Saunder Jurriaans – *The Gift*  
Drum & Lace – *Cobweb*  
Benjamin Wallfisch – *It #4* Derry  
Penka Kouneva - *Legends of Runeterra* - Shadow Isles; *Applewood*  
Marco Beltrami - *A Quiet Place* (the first film) and other Beltrami scores (orchestral design)

## 9. ANALYSIS OF GENRES: SciFi, FANTASY, SUPERHERO.

Score a cue to picture (4 clips to choose from – PAN sizzle, G5 game, Ashes of Creation video game, P207m27)

Analysis: Benjamin Wallfisch – *Shazam*  
Atli Orvarsson - *Silo* Season 1  
Marco Beltrami – *Hellboy 2004*  
Gareth Coker - *Ori and the Will of Wisps*  
Penka Kouneva – *Elementerra* VR game  
Steve Jablonsky - *Ender’s Game*

## 10. ORIGINALITY & INNOVATION in media scoring.

Scoring assignment: revise and finalize all your demos written for the Masterclass. Polish and finalize your genre reels, your Introductory (“highlights”) reel, your website, bio and pitch letters.

Analysis: Hans Zimmer *Dune* (2021)  
Stephanie Economou – *Ruby Gillman Teenage Kraken*  
Neal Acree – *World of Warcraft Shadowlands*  
Johann Johannsson – *Arrival*  
Blizzard – *Diablo 4* OST  
Hildur Gudnadottir – *Chernobyl*

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## LIST OF LECTURES, BLOGS and SLIDE DECKS for WEEKLY INDEPENDENT READING

- WEEK 1** –
- The Collaborative Composer (blog)
  - Temp Score (blog)
  - Methodologies for Score Study (blogs by 4 leading Hollywood orchestrators)
  - Selected 20<sup>th</sup> orchestral works inspirational for media composers (a list for independent study)
  - Steve Jablonsky – Gears of War 2 Theme – memorable theme & thematic development (blog)
  - Theme and Thematic Development
- WEEK 2** -
- Composer Artistic Development (Slide Deck)
  - Pandora TV series lecture (Slide Deck in 03 Analyze folder)
  - Composer Sarah Schachner – interviews (in 03 Analyze folder)
  - Composer Harry Gregson-Williams – interviews (in 03 Analyze folder)
  - Tim Davis DeBrevé (blog by a leading Hollywood orchestrator/arranger)
- WEEK 3** -
- Methodology: Listen, Distill, Select (blog)
  - Winifred Phillips GDC lecture (video), Meters (video)
- WEEK 4** -
- A basic roadmap of best practices for using orchestral instruments (blog)
  - MIDI & Orchestration Lecture (Slide Deck)
  - Best scores of 2023
  - Film Scoring Workflow
  - Tchaikovsky Serenade – Analysis
  - Overtone Series (chart)
- WEEK 5** -
- Academy of Scoring Arts: Form & Analysis Slide Deck & *Rebirth of Id* scores & mp3s
  - Classical & Pop Forms – blog
  - Career Development – Attendee Questions (Chance Thomas May 2021 Seminar)
  - Cultivating Scoring Techniques and Workflow
- WEEK 6** -
- Cultivating a Career as a Media Composer (Slide Deck from a 2-hour lecture)
  - Comedy composers and their soundtracks
  - Tips for networking
  - How I got every significant scoring job – via referrals
- WEEK 7** -
- Film Composer Contracts – actual contracts
  - Chance Thomas – Interpreting *Directorese* + What drives the mood in music?

- Penka Kouneva – Interpreting *Directorese* (blog)
- Cold Email pitch to a Director (sample email & blog)
- How do I get signed by a Film Composer Agent (blog)
- Current (2024) Film & TV Composers for study
- Dealing with Writer’s Block (blog)
- John Rodd (Mixing Engineer extraordinaire) GDC lecture & MIX interview
- List of Scores featuring Guitar as the main color
- List of “Young Adult” genre drama films

- WEEK 8 -**
- Schedule and plan your time when you are scoring a feature film (blog)
  - *Encounter* lecture & Collaborative Process on a low-budget indie feature film
  - Horror music ideas and musical syntax
  - A pitch email to Production Music Library (a good template that delivers results)

- WEEK 9 -**
- All questions I’ve been asked by emerging composers (blog in 3 parts)
  - Tips on your demo and other career advice
  - Jesse James blog “*You Will Find Success If ...*”
  - US-based and Canada-based opportunities for composers
  - More innovative recent Film and TV scores
  - *Why film composers fail* by Mark Northam, edited by PK

- WEEK 10 -**
- What Are Originality and Innovation (blog)
  - Great recent innovative scores to study (list)
  - The Best Scores of 2023 by Daniel Schweiger